— THE HEART OF —

A PLAGUE TALE

A VISUAL MAKING-OF

The Heart of A Plague Tale
by Benoît Reinier
Published by Third Éditions
10 rue des Arts, 31000 Toulouse
contact@thirdeditions.com
www.thirdeditions.com

Follow us:
@ThirdEditions
Facebook.com/ThirdEditionsFR
Third Éditions

All rights reserved. This work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form, whether in whole or in part, without the written authorization of the copyright holder.

Any copy or reproduction, by any means, constitutes a copyright infringement subject to the sanctions set forth by French Law No. 57-298 of March 11, 1957, pertaining to copyright protection.

The Third Éditions logo is a registered trademark of Third Éditions, registered in France and in other countries.

Publishing directors: Nicolas Courcier and Mehdi El Kanafi
Edited by: Damien Mecheri
Editorial assistants: Ken Bruno and Ludovic Castro
Texts by: Benoît Reinier
Translated from French by: Michael Ross – ITC Traductions
Layout: Marion Millier
Covers: Olivier Ponsonnet
Artwork: Olivier Ponsonnet (art director), Damien Papet (concept artist), Tom Hisbergue (concept artist), Adonia Urian (character modeler), Loic Paulus (character modeler), Nicolas Villeminot (concept artist)

The promotional visuals, game stills, logos, and conceptual drawings used to create this work are the property of their respective intellectual property right owners.
Asobo Studio is a registered trademark.
© 2019-2022 Asobo Studio and Focus Entertainment. All rights reserved

English edition, copyright 2022, Third Éditions.
All rights reserved.
ISBN 978-2-37784-335-0
Printed in the European Union by TypoLibris

BENOÎT "EXSERV" REINIER

— THE HEART OF —
A PLAGUE TALE
A VISUAL MAKING-OF

03rd.
THIRD
éditions

CONTENTS

PREFACE | P.09

CREATION | P.13

UNIVERSE | P.91

DECRYPTION | P.135

CONCLUSION | P.185

I

PREFACE

SINCE LAUNCHING HIS YOUTUBE CHANNEL IN 2011, BENOÎT "EXSERV" REINIER HAS WORN MANY HATS AND JUGGLED VARIOUS JOBS.

He worked as a journalist on the editorial team at *Gamekult* between 2014 and 2018, as well as signing with *Next INpact* and *PlayStation Magazine.* Today, his time is divided between his work as a YouTuber, podcaster, and game design consultant.

He did some consulting on games such as *Dark Devotion* and *Crying Suns*, and he's currently working as a game design consultant for several big projects in development. He also wrote *Diablo : Genèse et rédemption d'un titan* (*Diablo: Genesis and Redemption of a Titan*), *The Heart of Dead Cells* and *The Rise of The Witcher. A New RPG King*, published by Third Éditions.

I can hardly believe it: this is the fourth time that I'm writing a preface for a book of which I'm the author. If this is the first time you've come across my pseudonym, allow me to give you a brief rundown of my career. After falling in love with *Demon's Souls* in 2009, I decided to talk about the game to as many people as possible, and creating a video guide seemed to me the best way to achieve that aim. So, over a decade ago, I became a YouTuber, and that's now my full-time job. Over the years, I've worn several other hats: I worked as a journalist for the website *Gamekult*; I've written several books published by Third Éditions; I teach classes on the history of video games; I host a podcast called *Fin du Game* with my associates Hugo and Maxime; and finally, I serve as a consultant for many game developers, and one of those consulting clients is, in fact, Asobo Studio. Since integrity is "in my bones," as my former editor in chief used to say, in the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that I actually conducted a playtest for *A Plague Tale: Requiem*. By this I mean that I was paid to play the game and present my opinions on various aspects of the gameplay, the rhythm, and the game's storytelling.

While it's impossible to be totally neutral when you write a book dedicated to a series, it's essential to honestly admit your biases. For close to three years, I was in regular contact with the Asobo team, and since I knew the game well, they asked me to play it so that I could give them my first impressions. Among all of the paradoxes that I've faced as a video-game journalist, the paradox of getting close to developers is partially the reason why it's hard to maintain this position in the long term. As a tester, my role is to take a relatively impartial look at a game at the time of its release so that I can advise readers as to whether or not they should play it. The case is closed on the importance of ratings in the video-game industry. Still, as the years go by, we journalists naturally meet developers, conduct interviews, produce reports, and end up becoming familiar with the reality of the various professions in the video-game world.

That's where this paradox comes in: the more I know about what's happening behind the scenes, the less I'm able to honestly claim to be impartial. However, over time, the more I know about what's happening behind the scenes, the more I'm able to add value to my articles, playing the role of a mediator between the industry and players. It's very difficult to maintain a balance, and that undoubtedly explains why so many of my former colleagues have ended up, like me, offering their services as consultants, or otherwise embracing careers in development or marketing. As I am no longer a journalist, but instead an influencer (although I hate that term), I'm not held to the same ethical standards. However, I find myself regularly thinking about these issues, to the point that I've made several videos on the subject to give myself a chance to talk about it. In the end, though, you may be wondering, how does this relate to *A Plague Tale*? Well, it's precisely because these issues are constantly bouncing around in my head that I'm taking the opportunity to share with you my reflections through this preface.

I'm absolutely not neutral when it comes to the adventures of Amicia and Hugo: well before I got to know the members of the studio, I was already impressed with their work and the quality of the game, in spite of having been developed by such a small team. I called the first installment an "exceptional game" in my test video. Indeed, it was my love for *Innocence* that led me to boldly suggest that writing a book about it would be a good idea. Surprising though it may seem, it's thanks to a humble tweet[1] that the book you're holding in your hands exists. The idea came to me from a player who, in May 2019, asked the Asobo Studio account if they planned to collaborate with Third Éditions. At that point in time, there was no such plan, but I saw no reason why not to insert myself into the conversation by saying that I was "very into it" and wanted to see such a project become a reality. Ironically, the tweet was only read by a handful of people, but I'm sure you'll give it a second life after reading this book.

A few weeks later, I received a message from Aurélie Belzanne, who was then the marketing and communications manager for Asobo Studio. She informed me that the idea was gaining traction within the studio and that they wanted to discuss the project with us. One thing led to another and in November 2019, I found myself on a flight to Bordeaux once again. A year earlier, I had gone there to meet with members of the studio Motion Twin to write *The Heart of Dead Cells*, also published by Third Éditions. After that first meeting in November 2019, things did not go quite as planned due to the outbreak of the youknowwhat pandemic, but I'm honored to be able to bring this new project to fruition. It's an extremely rare opportunity to be able to follow the work of a team for such a long time. Of course, I would have preferred to visit them in person more often, but I consider myself lucky to have been able to keep learning more about the reality of the many trades within a game development studio. In turn, I hope that I'm able to pass on to you some of my knowledge and give you a bit of context about the creation of a video game. As I say this, I realize that I would never have been able to go this deep if I had remained a journalist. As such, I'm so glad that I took the plunge several years ago. With that, I will leave you with Amicia and Hugo, but also with all of the women and men who imagined and developed their story and their unique universe.

1. The message in question: *https://twitter.com/exserv85/status/1131303777460523015*

II

CREATION

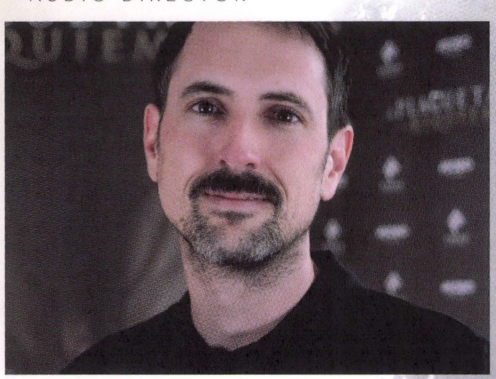
THE HISTORY OF ASOBO STUDIO

If you pay close attention to video game news, you quickly realize that game studios and console makers are very protective of their secrets. This concern for confidentiality is not a new trend and can largely be explained by the constant growth in the industry's annual revenues[1]. Rumors are almost always relayed by video game news media and can sometimes have an impact on stock prices. Even within the studios, it's not unusual for teams to be separated so that they don't know what their colleagues are working on. Projects in development typically get a code name to control information. And when games are tested, the privilege of playing before the official release requires accepting embargo conditions or signing a nondisclosure agreement.

This culture of secrecy has been part of my daily life for years now, and the reason why I'm telling you all this in the introduction to this book is to underscore the exceptional experience I had talking with the Asobo Studio team in preparation for writing this text. I was lucky to have the opportunity to play *A Plague Tale: Requiem* while it was still in production, but even better, I got the chance to talk freely with the team for close to three years. The original plan was for me to visit the offices of Asobo Studio in Bordeaux on several occasions to witness certain key moments in the production process up close and personal. Unfortunately, the pandemic had other plans for us and, like everyone else, we ended up having numerous conversations via video chat.

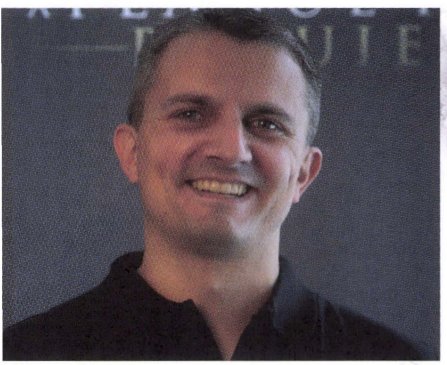
Still, I got the opportunity to visit them once in October 2019, just a few months before the release of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*. There were just 20 or so members of the team working on the prototype for the sequel to the adventures of Amicia and Hugo. Over the span of a few days, I talked with members of one of the oldest French game studios still in operation. In spite of that distinction, though, the company is not very well known among mainstream

AURELIEN PITERS
AUDIO DIRECTOR

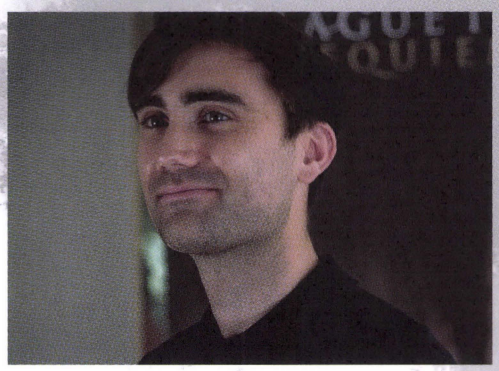


BRICE DAVIN
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

CYRIL DOILLON
LEAD PROGRAMMER



KEVIN CHOTEAU
GAME DIRECTOR



KEVIN PINSON
LEAD GAME DESIGNER

NICOLAS BECAVIN
LEAD ENGINE PROGRAMMER

audiences. Founded in 2002 by 12 friends and colleagues, Asobo Studio has long remained in the shadows, but has an excellent reputation in the industry as a development studio for hire. Asobo has developed games for big names like THQ, Pixar, and Microsoft, and now aims to demonstrate their talent on the world stage.

In fact, Microsoft gave the studio their big break recently. A few months before our first meeting, during E3 2019, an announcement with great fanfare was made for the return of an old series: *Flight Simulator*. This comeback was a big deal since the franchise hadn't had a new installment since 2006 and the game would also accompany the launch of a new generation of consoles: the Xbox Series X and S. The project involved many concerns, both technical and commercial, and Asobo Studio was entrusted with the delicate mission of bringing *Flight Simulator* back in a big way. During my first visit, I was surprised to discover the contrast between the massive team in charge of Project *Kitty Hawk* (the codename given to *Flight Simulator*) and the more modest team responsible for *A Plague Tale: Innocence*.

It wasn't just the number of people involved: the two projects were a world apart. On the one hand, you had an ultra-realistic simulation game with cutting-edge visual rendering and, on the other hand, you had the adventures of Amicia and Hugo, two children fleeing the Black Death amidst the Hundred Years' War. The reason why I'm underscoring this point is that it's quite unusual to see a studio simultaneously managing two such different projects, and, in my opinion, this versatility may very well represent the essence of Asobo Studio's identity. Made up of experienced technicians who have proven themselves over the years, the Bordeaux-based developer hopes to build a reputation on "games that have a strong emotional impact", as game director Kévin Choteau put it. And that's precisely the beating heart of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*.

1. In 2020, in France alone, the video game industry earned €5.31 billion in revenue (source: SELL).

THE *A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM* TEAM AT ASOBO STUDIO

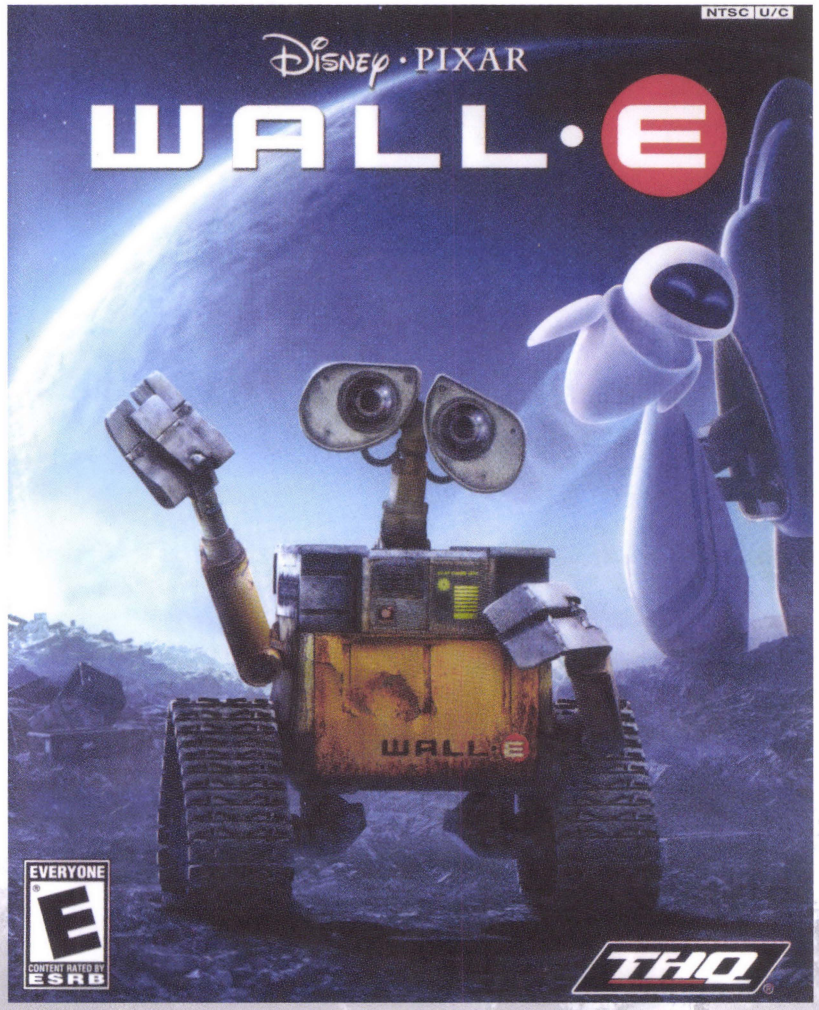
FROM PIXAR...

While working at the game studio Kalisto, 12 colleagues decided to spread their wings and fly. They came together to found Asobo Studio in 2002. They developed their first game, *Super Farm*, which was released for the PlayStation 2 in 2003. Before long, the start-up was approached by HIP Interactive, a Canadian game publisher, who commissioned them to develop a game based on the animated series *The Mummy*[2]. On that project, Brice Davin, now the producer for the *Plague Tale* series, met the members of Asobo Studio. He then joined the company in 2005 to work on another commission: the video game adaptation of the film *Ratatouille*. Pixar wanted to simultaneously release the movie and a video game for every platform at the time, so the company turned to THQ[3] to create them. In turn, the video game publisher hired different studios to produce a game for each of the platforms at the same time, with production starting even before all of the details for the animated film had been finalized. The studio Heavy Iron was tasked with creating the PlayStation 3 version, while Asobo Studio was asked to develop the game for the PlayStation 2. Working with a company like Pixar is a rare opportunity, and that first experience proved to be both edifying and complicated for the Bordeaux-based company, which had to work with very strict specifications.

Every single visual, audio, and narrative element of the game had to be approved by Pixar. This included everything from the designs of the buildings and their placement in the locations featured in the film, to the animations of the characters. Pixar's vision had to be followed so that audiences would get a consistent experience between the movie theater and their TVs at home. While these constraints forced Asobo Studio to demonstrate extraordinary attention to detail, it was also an opportunity for them to learn to make the most of the slight wiggle room left for them to express their creativity. To give you an example of the constraints they faced, the PlayStation 2 version of the game had to use the same scripts and the same voices as the PlayStation 3 version, in spite of the fact that it was developed by a different studio. Avoiding making a carbon copy was no simple task, but their efforts paid off: when the games were released, the Asobo Studio version received the best reviews from video game media.

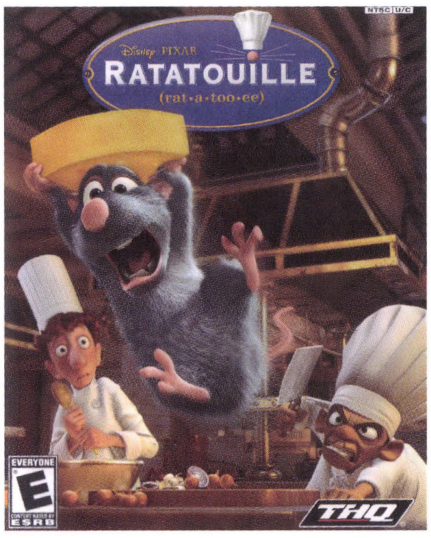
With that first experience under their belts, the French developers were offered another similar project, creating the video game adaptation for another Pixar film, *WALL·E*, again for the PlayStation 2. This second collaboration allowed the members of Asobo Studio to build their confidence, and the company began to enjoy a strong reputation as a development studio for hire, with the motto "on time, on budget." At the same time, a second team worked on the development of an open-world car racing game, a project led, notably, by Sebastian Wloch, one of the founders and currently the head of Asobo Studio. Initially entitled *Grand Raid Offroad*, the project evolved as the studio began working with the publisher Codemaster, a British company specializing in car games. Thanks to Codemaster's financial support, Asobo Studio bulked up by hiring close to 80 people, who worked tirelessly to develop *FUEL*.

The game was released in 2009 after a very complex production process. This was particularly due to the fact that the game presented a major technical challenge: it's

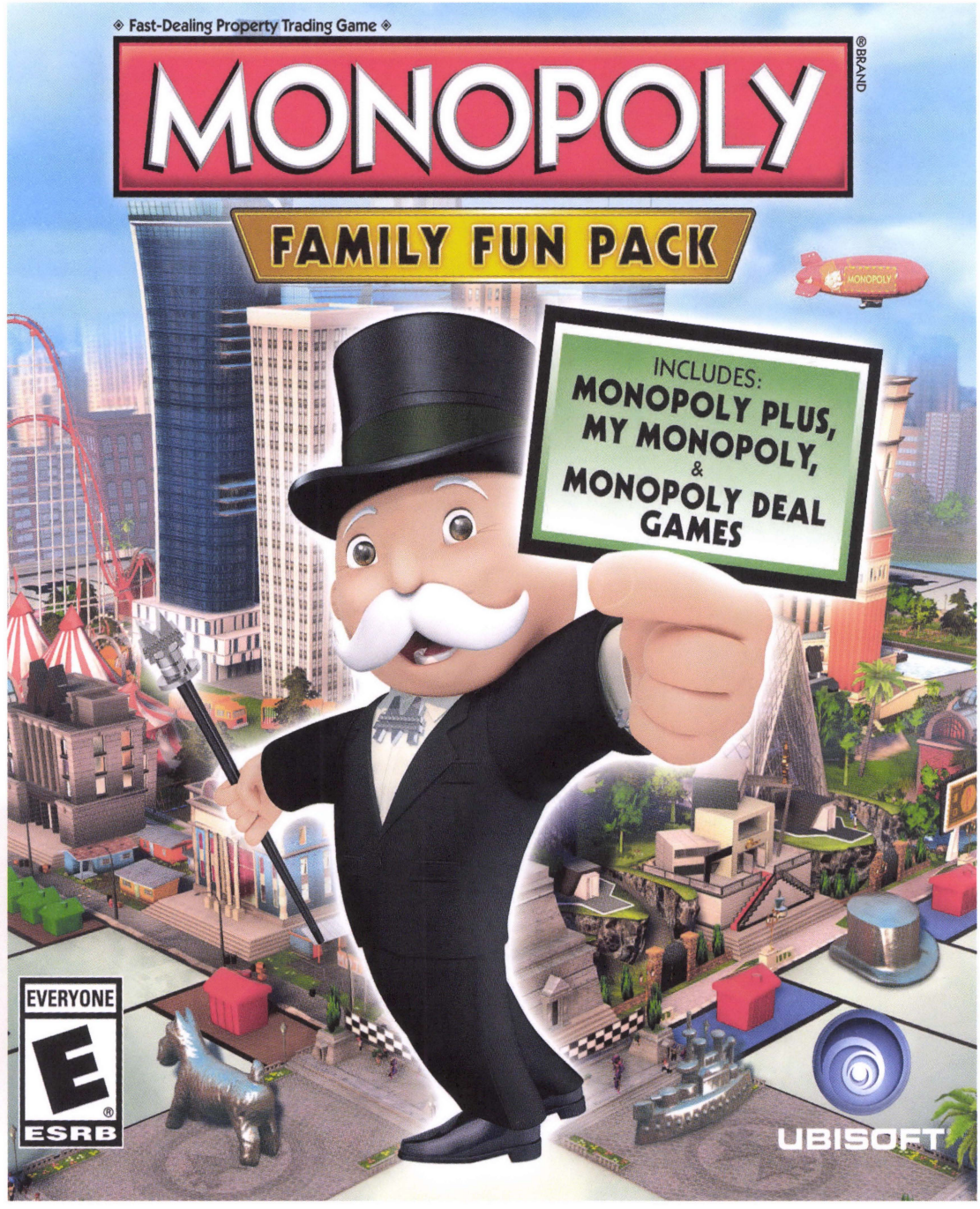


2. The animated series based on the film *The Mummy*, released in 1999 and directed by Stephen Sommers.

3. THQ was an American game publisher founded in 1990. The company declared bankruptcy in 2012 before closing for good in 2013. THQ was behind hundreds of games and franchises, some of the best known being *Darksiders*, *Saints Row*, and *Company of Heroes*.



set in a massive open world, in fact, one so big that it made it into the *Guinness World Records*. Unfortunately, sales of the game were not as strong as they'd hoped and the many employees hired meant that the studio has to quickly find another project. In spite of its lackluster success, *FUEL* was the first original game from Asobo, and the studio aimed to take their vision further. They came up with a prototype in which players could leave their vehicles. The project, known internally as *POST*, was never released. That's because the studio had to prepare for an order from another big name: Microsoft. The American titan was secretly developing a new technology based on motion-sensing.



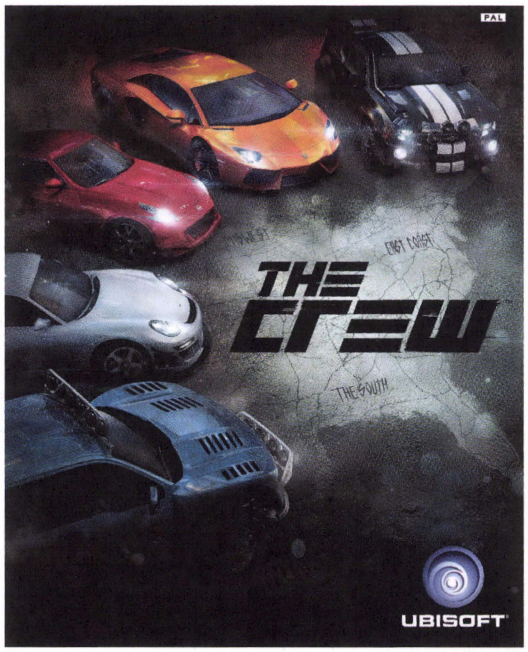
... TO MICROSOFT

In 2006, Nintendo took the entire world by surprise with the Wii, a console that was less powerful than their competitors, but which relied on motion-sensing remote controls. This new way of playing took the world by storm and opened up video games to a broader audience. The other console makers then began thinking about how they too could take advantage of this technology. Sony developed the PlayStation Move, using remotes more precise than those of the Wii, while Microsoft developed a camera capable of sensing movements and translating them into the game, a new technology codenamed Project Natal.

For a long time, this promising technology was too precise: internally at Microsoft, playtests with younger players quickly showed the limits of the camera. When children tried out game prototypes, it turned out that after just a few minutes, they were exhausted from the intensity of

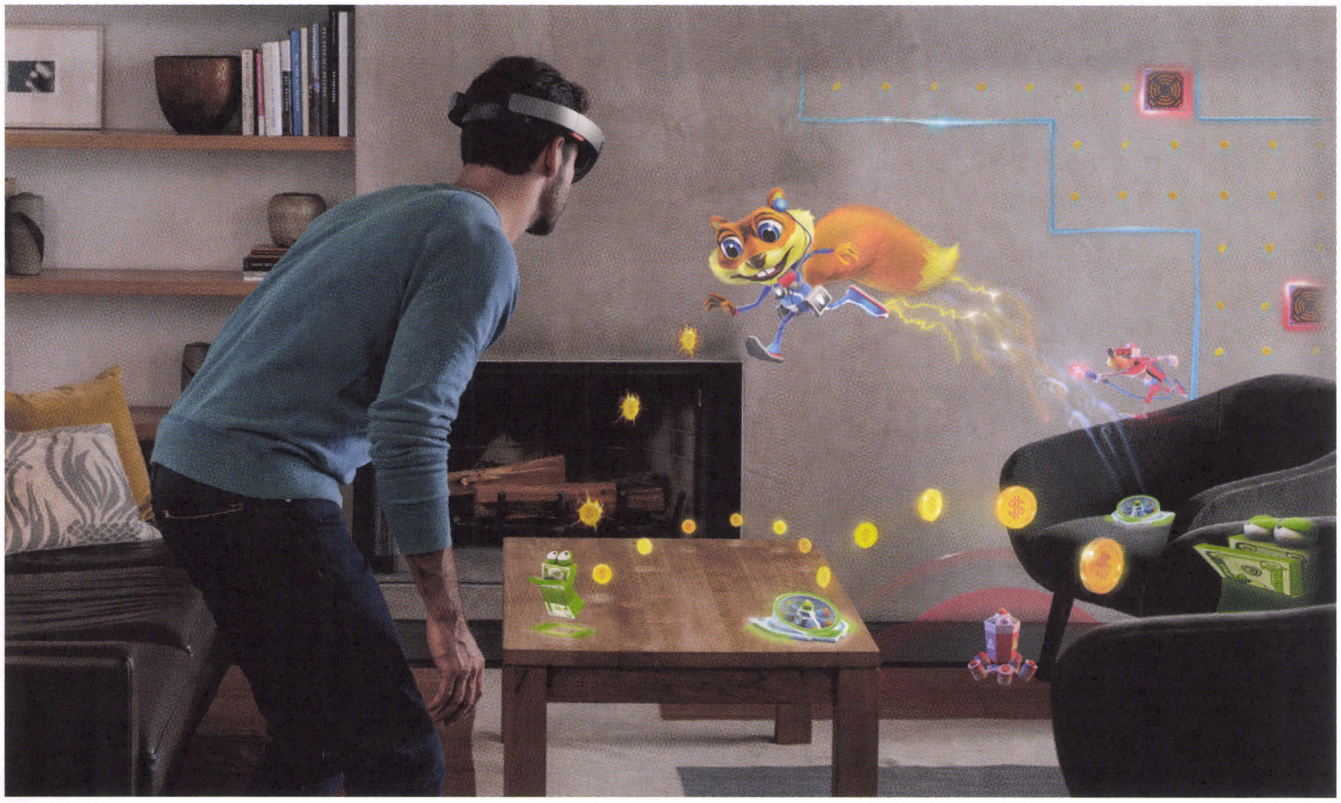
the physical activity required to play. In fact, that's one of the reasons why the Kinect—the name ultimately given to the camera—ended up being less precise than when Microsoft first announced it. This anecdote was told to me by Kévin Choteau, game director for the *Plague Tale* series, who joined Asobo Studio in 2011 as the level designer for the game *Kinect Rush: A Disney-Pixar Adventure*. At the time, the project was the most ambitious that the studio had ever embarked upon. Asobo continued hiring, growing to 120 employees. Beyond the technical challenge of using motion-sensing, many of the studio's artists began developing a bold concept: instead of playing as the hero of an animated film, why not play as an avatar who gets to explore the universe of said film?

While the idea seemed quite harmless, Pixar had to be convinced to sign off on characters created from scratch by the French artists, which was a bit of a feat. The game was released in 2012 and received fairly positive reviews. However, motion gaming was on the decline and turned out not to be the El Dorado that companies had hoped it would be. The Asobo team, with their expanded workforce, began searching for new projects and ended up lending a hand to a Lyon-based team, Ivory Tower, that was working for Ubisoft on an open-world car racing game called *The Crew*. Asobo's experience with *FUEL* made them the ideal candidate for developing the game's Xbox 360 and



PlayStation 3 versions. However, in spite of the studio's technical prowess, the Ubisoft-produced game was ultimately only released for the Microsoft console[4]. Thankfully, this setback did not bring an end to the collaboration with Ubisoft, which hired Asobo to develop *Monopoly +*, one of the many adaptations of the famous board game.

4. We now know that there were many difficulties related to usage of the PlayStation 3's Cell processor, and the cancellation of *The Crew* for the PS3 is a great example.



RECORE AND HOLOLENS

That brings us to 2014, barely a year after the release of the Xbox One, at a time when Microsoft was hoping to discreetly nail the coffin on motion gaming while developing new franchises to expand their catalogue of exclusive titles. This strategy involved the acquisition of many third-party game studios, as well as collaboration with external teams. Notably, that was the case for *ReCore*, a game co-developed by Armature, a team made up of former members of the famous Retro Studios[5] and Comcept, a studio founded by Keiji Inafune, a renowned former producer from Capcom. *ReCore* featured a main character named Joule, a young woman tasked with colonizing a desert planet with her robot companion. Designed to be a blend of action and adventure in the third person, the game offers an ambitious open world and proved to be very complicated to develop. As such, Microsoft asked Asobo to help with the project. The studio agreed, on the condition that they wouldn't simply work as a contractor: they wanted to provide all of their expertise, meaning developers, but also artists and game designers.

Behind that demand, we can see Asobo's growing desire to design their own game. In fact, according to Kévin Choteau: "*ReCore* was a game that we, ourselves, could imagine... Both the universe and the gameplay spoke to us, and it was both gratifying and frustrating to work on it. We would regularly encounter a problem and want to provide a solution that would be different from that of other studios, but since it wasn't our game, we weren't able to impose our own vision." In addition to feeding their desire to create something, *ReCore* offered the Asobo team the opportunity to work for the first time with the Unity engine. The experience was not a walk in the park. Members of the studio told me that it even strengthened Asobo's desire to have an engine and tools[6] developed internally. Independence is not necessarily just a creative concern in the video game industry, and keeping control over technologies can offer developers greater flexibility.

In the end, close to half of *ReCore* was designed by Asobo, according to Kévin Choteau: in addition to many gameplay elements, the majority of the game's dungeons were imagined and developed by his team. This new collaboration strengthened the Bordeaux-based studio's ties with Microsoft, which had been working on a new technology for a few years: an augmented-reality headset called HoloLens. Once again, Microsoft asked Asobo to work on game prototypes. After considering many different possibilities, Asobo got approval from the console maker to develop two games: *Young Conker* and *Fragments*.

The advantage of augmented reality is that digital, virtual elements can be superimposed over reality. However, to do so, you have to solve a major problem: you have to be able to scan people's homes with precision, since that

becomes the de facto game environment. The first step is thus to develop software capable of identifying the various pieces of furniture found inside someone's home and then transforming them into platforms, in the case of *Young Conker*, or into a crime scene, in the case of *Fragments*. In addition to the massive technical challenge posed by the new technology, Asobo Studio found itself for the first time developing a game with constant narration. As such, the studio had to seek out writers to bring *Fragments*' characters and investigations to life. One of the new recruits hired in 2014 was Sébastien Renard, who began working on Asobo's next original game as soon as the *Fragments* project ended.

5. Founded in 1998, Retro Studios is owned by Nintendo, and notably developed the Metroid Prime games.

6. By "tools," I mean the various software used to create elements of a game: this includes a dialogue manager, software designed to quickly generate backgrounds for levels, etc.

A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE: AN ORIGINAL AND PERSONAL GAME

THE PROJECT'S INCUBATION

It's very unusual to have such high-level access to the production schedule for a project and, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure that I've ever seen any others. For me, this book is a unique opportunity to learn and to share with you everything that I've been able to gather about the creative process for a video game. That said, I'd like to draw your attention to an important aspect: each studio has its own jargon and its own organization. Even worse, the roles and duties of team members differ from one company to the next, which, combined with the culture of secrecy previously mentioned, makes it difficult for the general public to understand what's really happening in the video game industry. As this book is dedicated to *A Plague Tale*, I'll be using the jargon heard at Asobo while taking the time to explain each term. As I regularly write and talk about video game creation, I often use the metaphor of sculpture to explain it: as I see it, the concept of chipping away at and shaping a medium to reveal a work of art is very fitting. However, before the sculptor starts sculpting, they first must create sketches, studies of volumes and forms: we call this an incubation phase. The duration of this phase can vary. In the case of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, it lasted close to a year, a long period that can be explained by the fact that it was a leap into the unknown for Asobo Studio.

You have to understand that when creators lay the foundations for a project, they are, above all, ideas on paper, as a video game requires several years to become a reality. As such, the incubation period is a phase for both research and experimentation. The basic mechanics of the game are developed in a prototype designed to test how well they work from a gaming perspective. For Asobo, incubation of this new project began in August 2015, and while the small team knew that they had to create a game that would have a strong emotional impact, they weren't yet thinking about the Black Death or even rats. Members of the studio had been wanting to pivot toward more narrative-driven games for several years. This was particularly the case for David Dedeine, creative director, who sings the praises of *The Last of Us*, a game released in 2013. Like many of his colleagues, he was deeply moved by this game from the studio Naughty Dog. The game was also a resounding success and showed the industry that it was possible, and even profitable, to design a big-budget game with a focus on narration.

In addition to being a major influence for the Asobo team, *The Last of Us* is also a reflection of its time: the average age of both players and developers has increased over the years and the teenagers of the '80s and '90s are now adults, and even parents of young children. The passing time looms large in the minds of video game creators, who are gradually taking a closer look at the medium and wanting to see it become more mature. Several, including Neil Druckmann of Naughty Dog, explicitly name their own relationship with parenthood as a source of inspiration for their games. In the late 2000s, more and more adventures began featuring two characters, often an adult and a child who may or may not be blood relatives. This was the case for *The Last of Us*. Other games used this same dynamic and we saw a real trend emerge, humorously called the "dadification" of video games.

The game from Naughty Dog explores, perhaps even more than the theme of parental responsibility, our relationship with the "other," with the other person no longer being an enemy, but rather an ally to be understood and supported. This was a bit of a revolution for video games, one that started a few years before the adventures of Joel and Ellie. Historically, video games have featured solitary heroes whose mission is to save the world (or a princess) by eliminating all enemies that get in their way. The usage of violence is rarely questioned and, in the end, that violence is closely tied to the medium's evolution. The works that question this state of affairs are few and far between, and they include the *Metal Gear Solid* series and the game *ICO*, released in 2001. The brainchild of Japanese creator Fumito Ueda, *ICO* really blazed a trail with its hero, a boy named Ico, who finds himself charged with protecting a girl named Yorda throughout the game. The two of them are forced to flee from an immense castle, and the game puts an emphasis on their interactions: notably, the player can hold Yorda's hand to guide her. While not as well known by mainstream audiences, *ICO* and other games by Ueda[7] had an impact in their time and in the minds of many developers, even drawing people into the profession[8].

7. The first three games by Fumito Ueda were released for Sony's consoles: *ICO* (2001), *Shadow of the Colossus* (2006), and *The Last Guardian* (2016).

8. I'm referring here to the creator and current head of the studio FromSoftware (*Dark Souls*) Hidetaka Miyazaki, who has said that he got interested in video games after playing *ICO*.

Even though violence is ubiquitous in the universe of *The Last of Us*, the Naughty Dog team continued the efforts started with *ICO* by exploring the consequences of violence on the main characters. It was an adventure that had a particularly strong impact on the members of the Asobo team: they, too, were dealing with the passage of time and becoming new parents. As such, they felt ready to explore this new path for video games. I mentioned previously the level of experience among the members of Asobo Studio and that is undoubtedly an important aspect of the company's identity. Unlike many other studios that see regular turnover of their employees, at Asobo, it's not unusual to find developers who've been there for over 10 years.

Having experienced developers comes with many advantages, the main one being that they've already completed the production of one or more games. One of the goals of this book is to explain just how complex it is to design a video game. So many unforeseen complications can arise that industry professionals often say that each game released is a small miracle. Taking part in the creation of a game and assisting with its release are invaluable experiences for developers. That said, in the case of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, the style of the game was totally new for Asobo Studio. As such, bringing the new project to life was no cakewalk.

IN SEARCH OF A UNIVERSE AND CHARACTERS

A video game is a collective undertaking, the fruit of much reflection, many iterations, trial and error, and reassessment. The objective of the incubation phase is to be able to present the key features of the project to the rest of the team. While the idea for *A Plague Tale* was slowly taking shape in David Dedeine's imagination, the studio's staff were mostly busy working on ReCore. There was no set team, and the other projects' needs determined the small group that began to form alongside the creative director. Their goal was to develop a short sequence to present the project both in-house and to potential partners. But to do so, you have to understand what the gaming world is like, and with almost 3,000 games released in 2015 for the PC[9], there was stiff competition, and that number only continued to increase year after year. The cost of productions has followed a similar trajectory, and creators are taking greater and greater risks, for both independent games and for blockbusters—called a "AAA" (pronounced "triple-A[10]") in industry jargon. In order to minimize risks, creators have to differentiate themselves from their competitors; thus, coming up with an original universe is a great approach. This early decision has an enormous impact on the future success of the game, just like the style of gameplay and the aesthetics.

Certain trends remain in vogue—I'm particularly thinking of post-apocalyptic and heroic fantasy universes, which we find in many productions. The Asobo team wanted to distinguish itself and, as they brainstormed, the desire to use their home Bordeaux region as a setting gained steam. Bordeaux has a very long history and, as the studio was looking to make a name for itself with a personal project, depicting a familiar place made a lot of sense. They then had to choose a time period for their story. For Sébastien Renard, the Middle Ages were chosen because they're rarely used as a setting and, more importantly, mainstream audiences don't really know the period. While doing his research, the author learned a bit more about the Black Plague that ravaged Europe in the 14th century, a scourge that came on top of the Hundred Years' War.

The formula already looked promising, and adding rats into the equation truly set *A Plague Tale*'s identity in stone. Depicting a disease isn't easy, and while the team considered the concept of fog, David Dedeine's idea for rats offered numerous advantages. Not only did they ensure original visuals, rats fit into the gameplay perfectly, allowing players to use light to fend them off. Representing mortal danger with a plague of rats is particularly explicit—the vermin became a pillar of the series, even appearing in the game's logo.

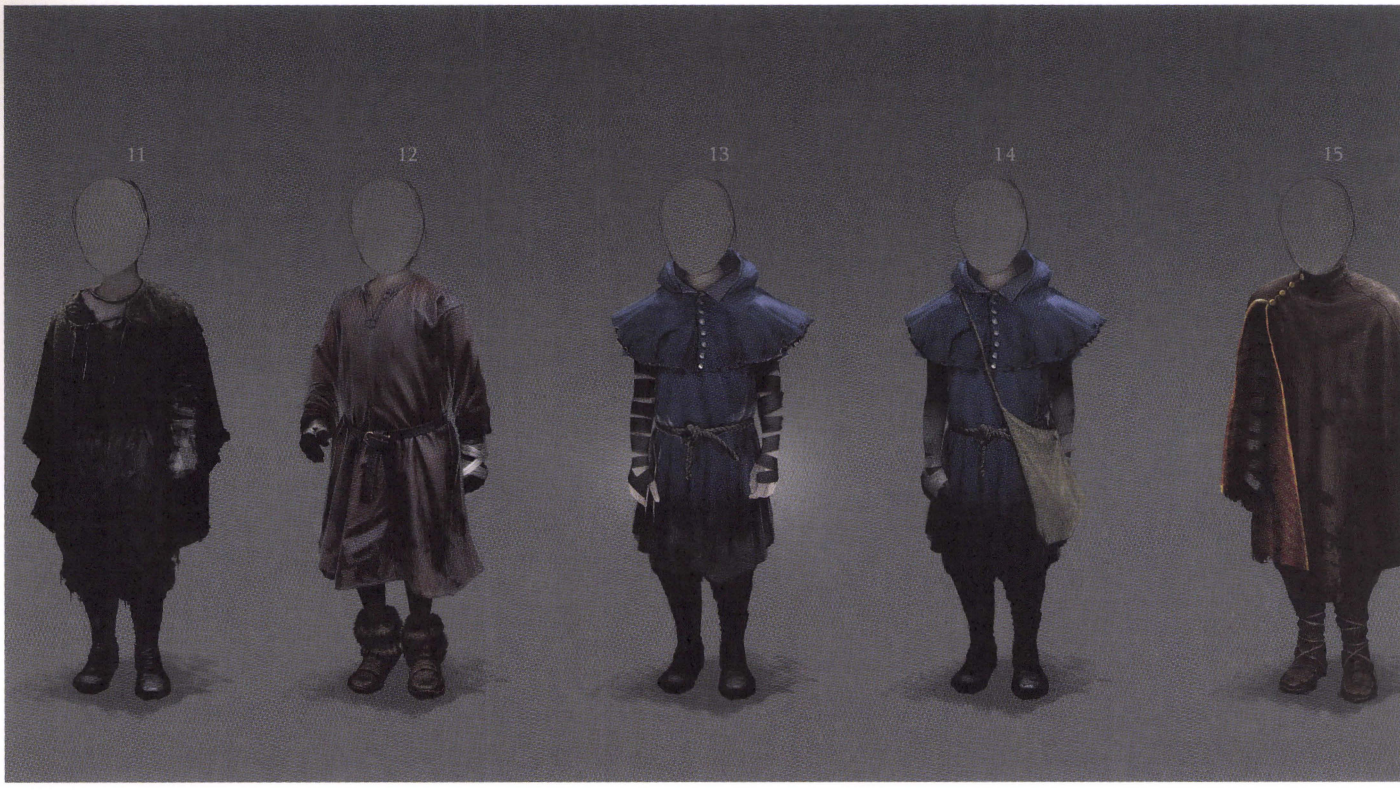
A massive conflict combined with a terrifying disease makes for a solid foundation for a video game universe. Then the creators figured, why not go further by putting a child at the heart of that hell on earth? The choice may seem cruel, but in the eyes of the team, it was a means of evoking empathy while playing around with the codes of stealth games.

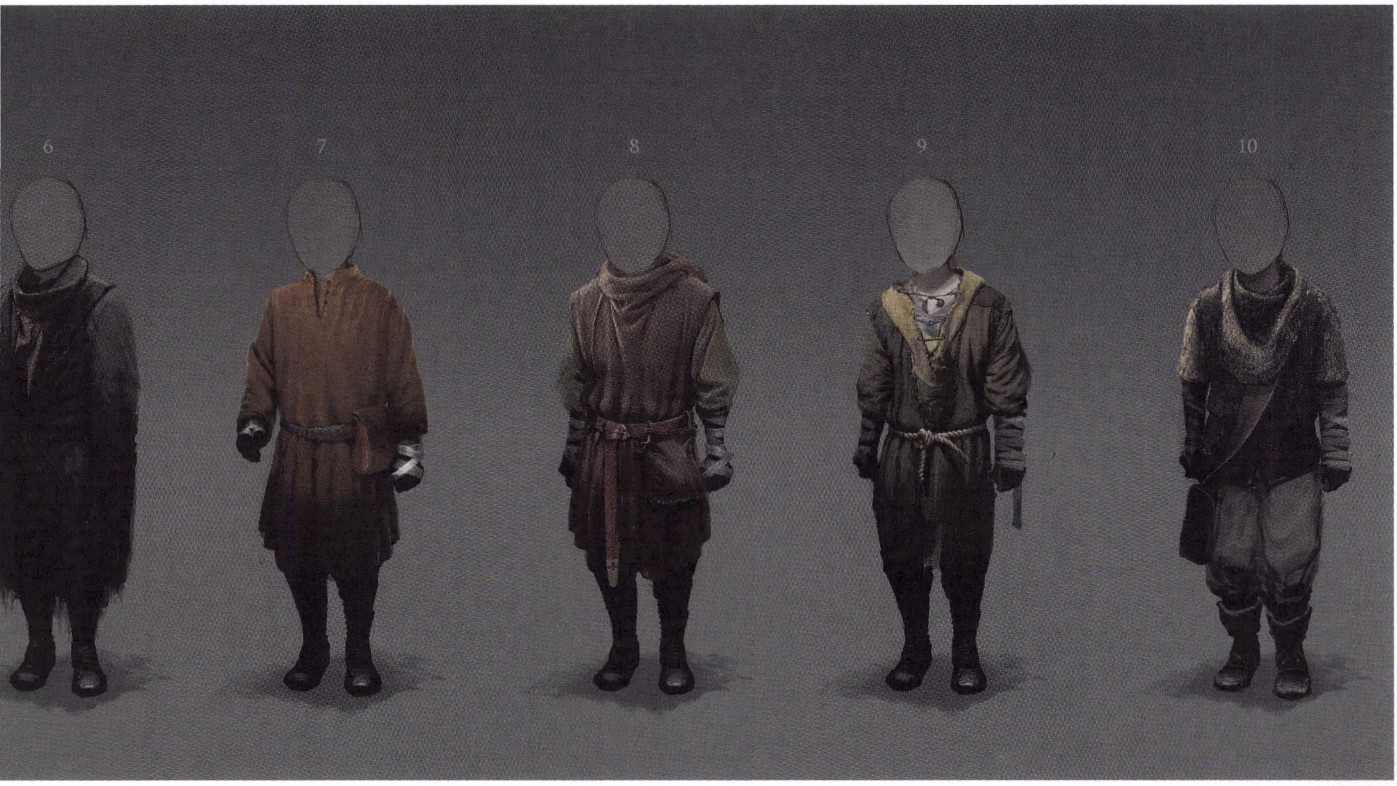
For a time, Amicia was the game's only protagonist. Her young age was a simple way to get players to understand the need for discretion. Before long, the idea of having her accompanied by her little brother won over Renard, who came up with the character of Hugo. This is a good example of the importance of the incubation phase, as the addition of the young boy gave the game its subtitle. Indeed, the concept of innocence proved to be central to the story: a young boy, isolated from the rest of the world, who finds himself faced with a cruel reality, with no one but his sister to rely on. The key features of the project began to take shape: a stealth game in which you play as a girl charged with protecting her little brother. However, the team still had hundreds of decisions to make, notably how faithful to history the adventure would be. As Sébastien Renard explained to me, children wouldn't really have been able to survive on their own in that era. The team had no qualms about taking liberties with reality, as their goal was not to offer a historical re-enactment, but rather to strike a balance between fact and fiction.

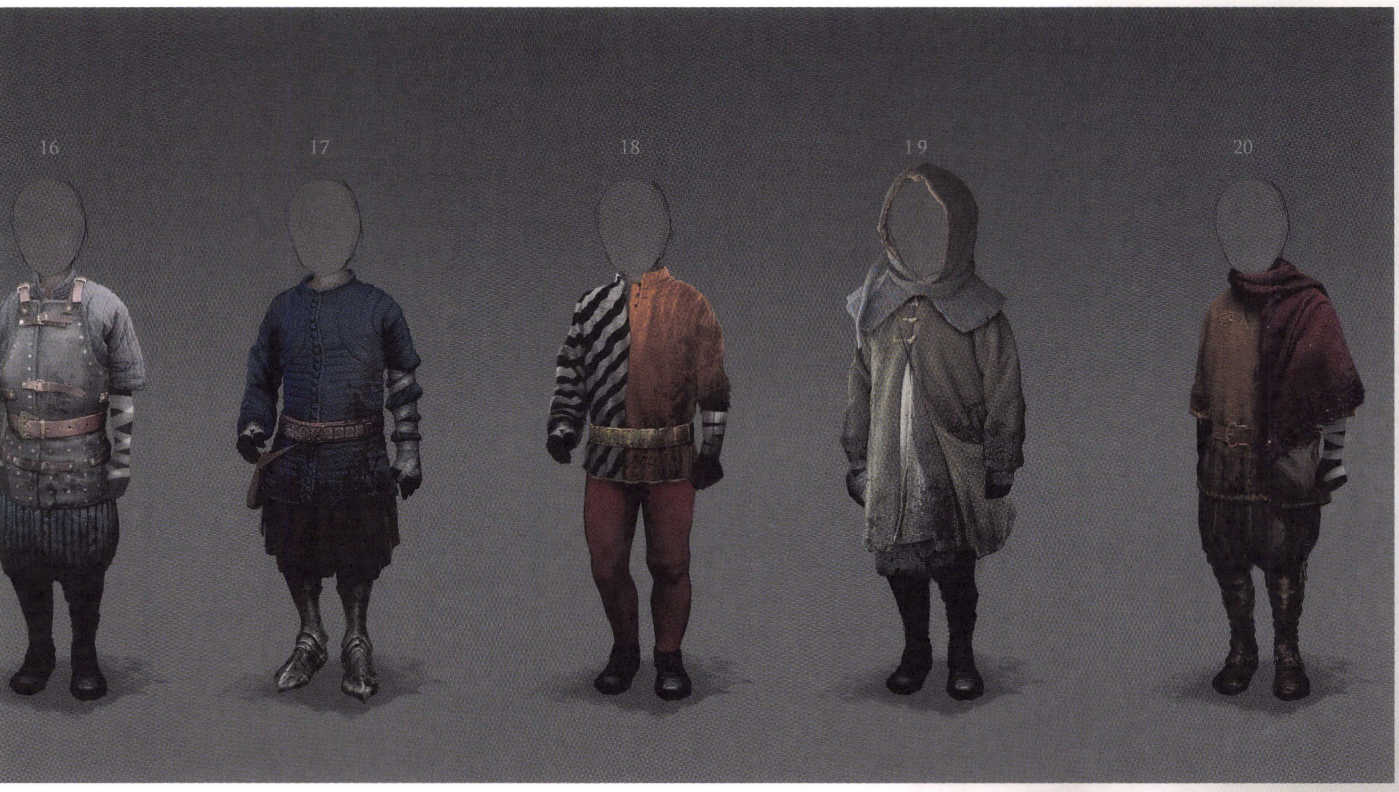
9. This is the number of games released on Steam, the leading platform in the PC market. Source: *https://www.statista.com/statistics/552623/number-games-released-steam/*

10. Inspired by bond rating systems, the number of As implicitly gives you an idea of a game's budget: a double-A game will be less costly to produce than a triple-A.

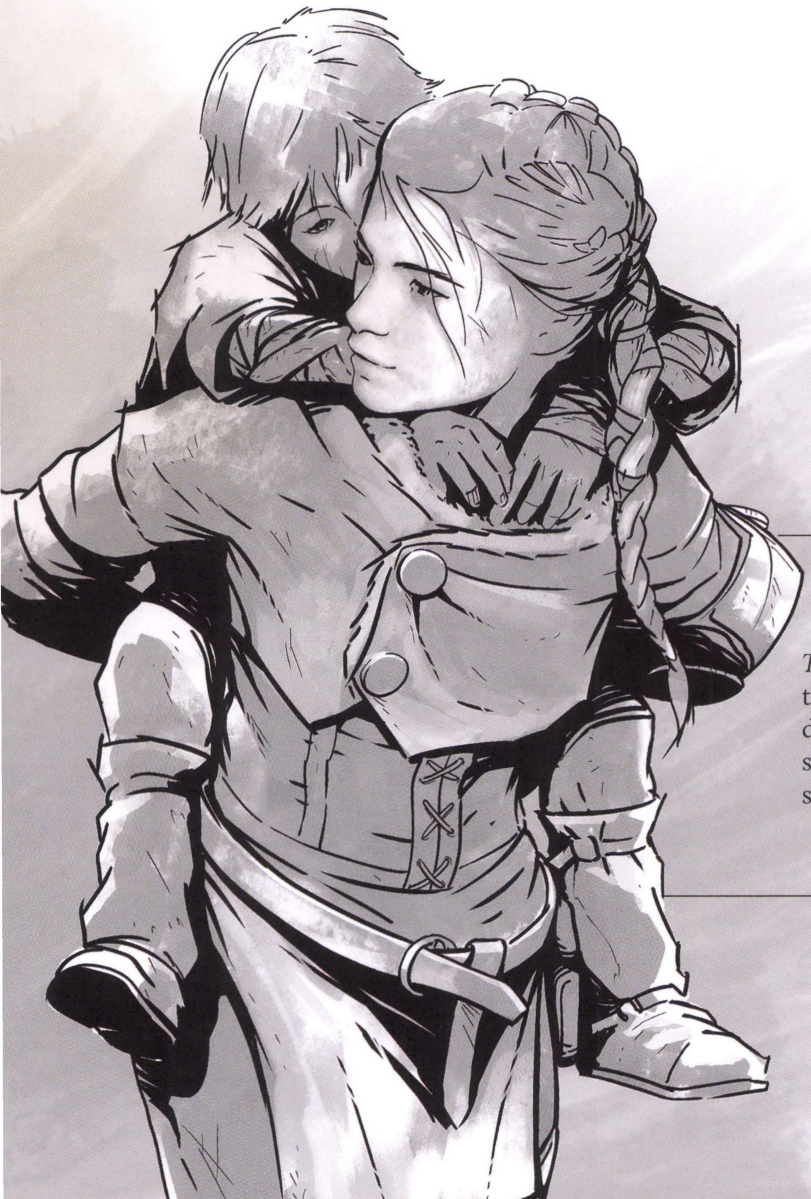
1
2
3
4
5


11
12
13
14
15


6
7
8
9
10


16
17
18
19
20

This aim for balance added the finishing touch to the game's title via the word "tale." The team wanted to avoid any confusion among players, as the game is "a plague tale," as in a sort of fairy tale about the Plague. And indeed, as the Middle Ages have a fantasy aura in the minds of the general public, the creators would be able to imagine events that seem plausible while not actually being historically accurate. Above all, the goal was to evoke emotion. As such, the game designers and authors could let their imaginations run wild, as long as they didn't stray too openly into the realm of fantasy. Each decision was evaluated first according to its narrative interest, then according to its interest from a gaming perspective. Only after did they ask the question of historical accuracy. In talking about this constant search for balance, Kévin Choteau regularly uses the word "grounded," a term he borrowed from Naughty Dog.



Speaking of the English language, the story of *A Plague Tale: Innocence* was originally written in English, even though the game takes place in France. To understand this decision, you have to remember, once again, that one of a studio's goals is to sell games: reaching the broadest possible audience is viewed as the approach with the least risk.

PREPRODUCTION

The concept of being "grounded" implies a certain respect for reality, without going as far as to propose a scientifically precise vision of a story element or of gameplay. Each element of the game and of the story must be plausible, but not necessarily real. It's an important nuance that gives the studio a certain amount of leeway to achieve its objective of stirring emotions while developing a striking game. The result of those first few months of reflection took the form of a short non-playable sequence, a prototype designed to give a specific idea of the studio's intentions in terms of aesthetics and gameplay. In around eight minutes, we see Amicia grappling with a few rats and guards. Thus, the mechanics related to the slingshot were already present. The second half of the prototype focuses on the story, showing Hugo and his sister being horrified when they discover a church totally infested with rats. The sequence ends as the children plunge into the darkness with a torch, followed by the appearance of the logo. I got the opportunity to view this video and I was amazed to discover just how many elements of the final game were already present at that early stage.

However, at the time the sequence was produced, none of the elements were playable yet and there was still a long road ahead to reach the game's release. First, the team had to find financing for the game's production. For that, they went to several game publishers with their demo. In addition to the prototype, they prepared a succinct presentation of the game to give their potential partners as much information as possible. While the video was there to show their plans for gameplay and aesthetics, the pitch document detailed the phases of the project, the desired budget, and the production schedule. I'll remind you that in 2015, Asobo Studio had an excellent relationship with Microsoft. However, from very early on, the team preferred to work with a more modest partner so that they would be able to create the game as they envisioned it.

LAURENTIUS
& LUCAS

The fact of playing as children in a game universe where violence is both graphic and psychological can scare off many a publisher, particularly since the age rating (PEGI in Europe, ESRB in the U.S.) can also have an impact on sales. The names of the other publishers approached by Asobo are one of the few pieces of information I couldn't get my hands on, as the studio's employees were under NDAs. Still, I learned that some publishers expressed definite reservations about the themes addressed in the game, as well as about the studio's choice to include gory scenes from so early in the adventure. While searching for a partner that could accept their vision, the team entered into conversations with the French publisher Focus Home Interactive[11], which has extensive experience with games that have more modest budgets, called "double-A" games. As I explained before, this categorization of games according to their budgets gives you an idea, to a certain extent, of the developers' degree of artistic freedom.

In 2021, AAA games typically had budgets that could easily exceed $40 million. *A Plague Tale: Innocence* cost barely a quarter of that amount. The more expensive a video game is to make, the more copies you have to sell to pay off the initial investment and ideally to earn a profit. Targeting a very broad audience means you have to make certain choices regarding gameplay and storytelling, whereas a game that's less costly to make has to make do with less impressive visuals. For Asobo, the latter was the lesser of two evils: indeed, the studio has its own engine, as well as extensive technical expertise, allowing them to create their game with quality close to that of a AAA production.

The discussions lasted for several months as certain aspects of the game were called into question and changes were made in-house. In addition to the short demo, the Bordeaux-based studio developed gameplay rooms, used to discover and play with certain gameplay mechanics. Ultimately, these demonstrations played a key role in convincing the former president of Focus, Cédric Lagarrigue, to take a risk by allowing Asobo to develop the game, without altering its vision.

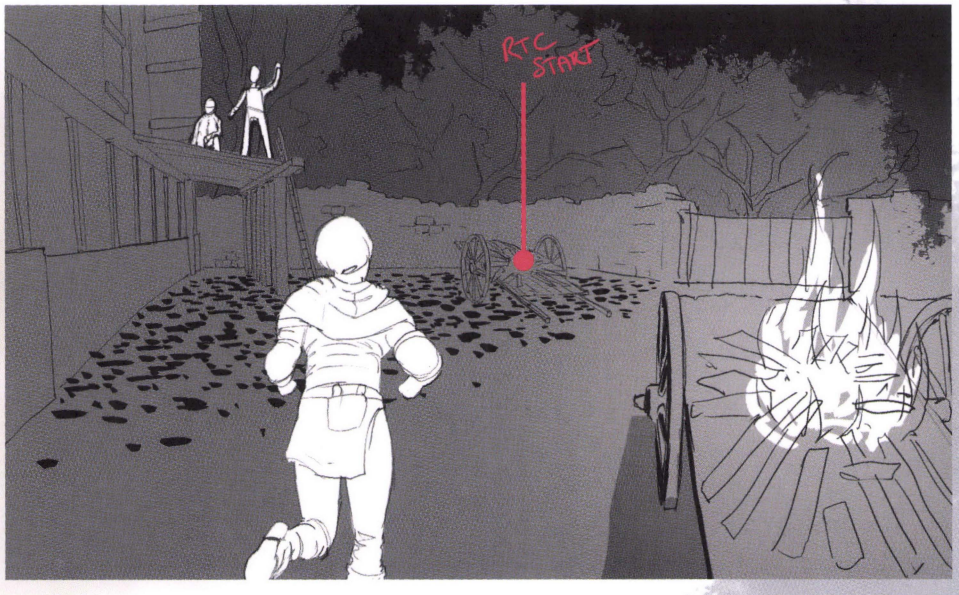
"The stars aligned," as Kévin Choteau puts it, and after several months of negotiations, an agreement was signed with Focus. At that point, the incubation phase had lasted almost a year and the next step was to develop what's called a "vertical slice."

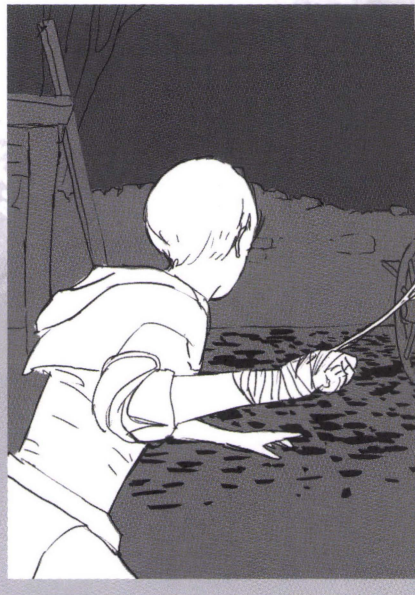
11. Founded in 1996, the game publisher had its IPO in 2015 and changed its name to Focus Entertainment in 2021. To date, they have published dozens of titles, including *Farming Simulator*, *The Surge*, *Vampyr*, and *Greedfall*.

THE VERTICAL SLICE

To illustrate this concept of a slice, imagine a cake made up of different layers. These are analogous to the game's levels, its gameplay, the dialogue, etc. In their complete versions, both the cake and the game consist of a stack of all these elements: cutting out a slice means offering a condensed experience of the whole. The goal is to produce a playable sequence, lasting 20 to 40 minutes, that includes most of the game mechanics, systems, and elements. As with the prototype, it was another opportunity to put the team's intentions for gameplay, aesthetics, and storytelling to the test in a real situation. By that I mean that the rhythm of the game, the distances traveled, and elements like difficulty are already present in what we can call a "first draft." All of those aspects can still be changed; moreover, that's often what happens during the actual production phase. Another advantage of creating a vertical slice is that it allows the studio to articulate the vision for the game to the new team members gradually added to the original team.

It was at this point that Eric Chort, who had been involved in the project's incubation phase, rejoined the team as an additional producer, alongside Brice Davin and Jamal Rguigui, to improve communication within the group. Quickly and effectively sharing information is essential for a project's success. During our conversations, members of the team often brought up this concept of a "vision" and they underscored the importance for a project lasting several years to be able to rely on a common basis. As I've said, the creation of a game goes through many changes and iterations, and the vision can be viewed as a benchmark, a way of evaluating the project. When it came time to select the level that would serve as the vertical slice, the story was not yet finalized. The team chose a sequence that takes place a few hours after the start of the game. The introductory and ending sequences of a game are too important to be used as a sample as nothing can be left up to chance. As such, the vertical slice took place in the fields leading

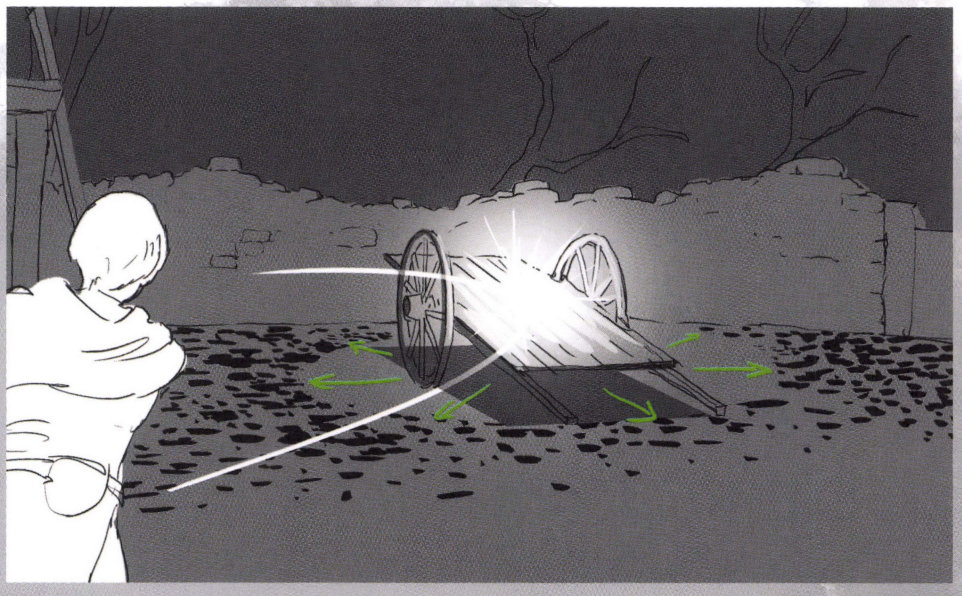


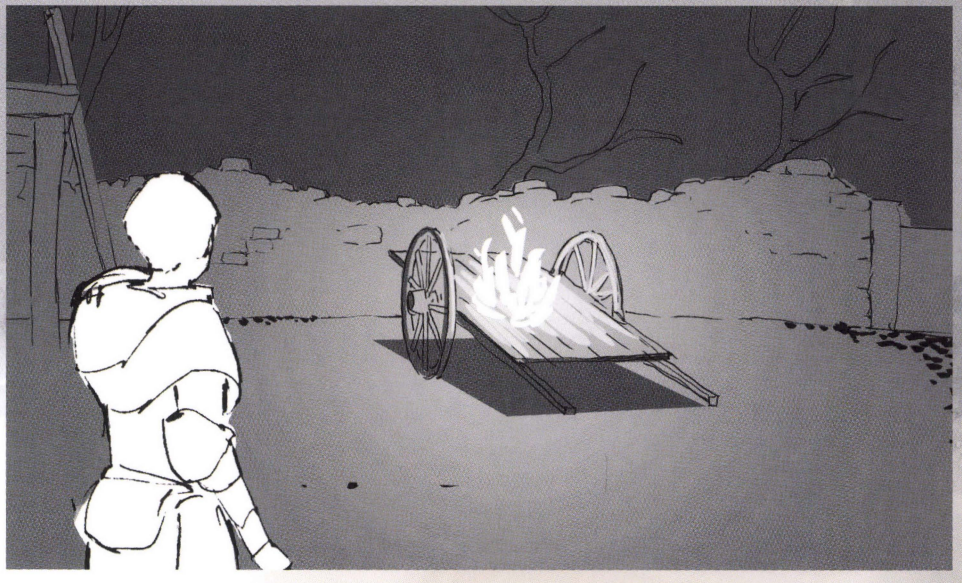


12. "Feedback" refers to information given to players. Any action should produce an audio, visual, or narrative effect in order to communicate to the player that a command has been registered by the game, a task has been completed, or a guard has been alerted.

to the home of the alchemist Laurentius—the chapter entitled "The Apprentice" in the final game. During my first visit to the Asobo Studio office, all of the heads of the different departments (art, sound, level design, etc.) presented to me and commented on this section. With a bit of nostalgia, they realized just how far they'd come since then. The game that I discovered in the vertical slice proved to be similar to the final version with regard to the lighting and aesthetics, but it was very different from the standpoint of difficulty and rhythm.

One important detail: at that point, the voices of the characters had not yet been recorded by professional voice actors; instead, the developers got help from their friends and family. Since the story hadn't been fully developed, there was no point in hiring voice actors for preproduction. Besides that aspect, the vertical slice proved to be incredibly difficult. "We gave no feedback[12] about the level of alert for enemies. Even we could see that we had a hard time playing, but even still, we kept it like that for some time," explains Kévin Choteau. The aiming assistance for Amicia's slingshot was minimal, with a plain dot appearing on the screen as an aiming cursor. Just firing the slingshot was itself a bit of a challenge. In the end, it was the game's rhythm that changed the most. "For a long time, we were afraid of downtime, both for gameplay and for storytelling. We had to fight that urge. It's always reassuring to fill a space with a gaming component," the game director continues. At the time, the team was satisfied overall with the vertical slice and prepared to launch full-fledged production of the game.





PRODUCTION

So, the vertical slice laid the foundations for the adventure. The team had a wealth of information, particularly regarding level design and the time required to complete levels. As production is the longest phase in the creation process, it was up to the producers to organize their teams' time and to assess the human resources required for each stage, called a "milestone" in video game jargon. The idea is that producers have to put together a production schedule that spans several years, hence the importance of having a clear idea of the ambitions of the game, the number of levels, the number of cutscenes, etc. There is also inherently a degree of uncertainty in such projects as anything can happen along the way, and that uncertainty is also taken into account in the production schedule. For *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, the production milestones each lasted about two months. The schedule was created in collaboration with the publisher, who, at each stage, received a version of the game in order to evaluate if the objectives had been met and to provide feedback to the team. Receiving constructive criticism is essential for progress on the project, as developers are often too close to the game to be able to see the big picture.

Luckily, Asobo Studio had an excellent relationship with Focus Entertainment. However, Brice Davin openly admits that exchanges between the two teams were not as regular as they could have been, an aspect that would be reworked for the production of the sequel. Returning to *Innocence*, a game changes a lot throughout its development, which is one of the factors that can explain the aforementioned culture of secrecy. Making promises to your audience too early on about mechanics or about a level of visual rendering can be a double-edged sword for both publishers and developers. Even for the world's most renowned studios, producing a game always involves experimenting, reconstructing, and deconstructing in order to hone each aspect. In addition to the milestones, the production team regularly conducts playtest sessions in order to get external feedback on the project's advancement. In other words, video game development is not an exact science, and the relative novelty of the medium also explains the diversity of approaches observed from one studio to the next.

During our first meeting, Brice Davin explained to me how things work at Asobo Studio: "Here, levels are the backbone. It's been that way since *WALL·E*. Each team has a level designer and a level builder[13]. It also has one or two artists who work on modeling and someone in charge of animation to bring the whole thing to life." In parallel, the story writer and the game director give the teams an overview of the plot for each level. The level designers then aim to determine which locations are the most appropriate and can have "dioramas" created. While a level is, in its most basic form, a group of gray blocks, the diorama is a fully modeled location with the purpose of setting the tone for each background.

With that, Sébastien Renard says that they quickly became aware of their lack of experience with story-driven games. The management of dialogue and of narrative events had to be modified in their homegrown engine. "We had to revamp not only our tools, but also our organization, because the scripts for the dialogue were previously left to the programmers," explains the story writer.

The issue was that in a game with a very prominent narrative, the text has central importance and also influences the rhythm of the game. "We looked at the matter of the speed of advancement, the time given to characters and thus the distance they travel in levels," Renard adds. It turned out that the writing of the story was inextricably linked with level design, and for close to 15 months, the team moved forward one step at a time, level by level.

This process followed logic acquired from the studio's years of experience: the levels are first roughly organized with the large spaces and important locations, then they are outfitted a bit more precisely with gray blocks. Next comes what the creators call a "first pass," an initial visual layout that blends the work done on the dioramas with the gray blocks. Finally, a second pass on each level adds a greater level of detail, and the lighting is adjusted with precision to add the final touch. At the highest point in production, the team had around 40 members, divided between programming, animation, modeling, sound, testing, and project management. While the backbone was made up of level design and the story, the team still had to animate the characters, program the elements of gameplay, test out the game's mechanics, create the various menus, and much more. And since it was a story-driven game, the team also had to consider a critical aspect: the voices of the characters, and thus the casting of the voice actors.

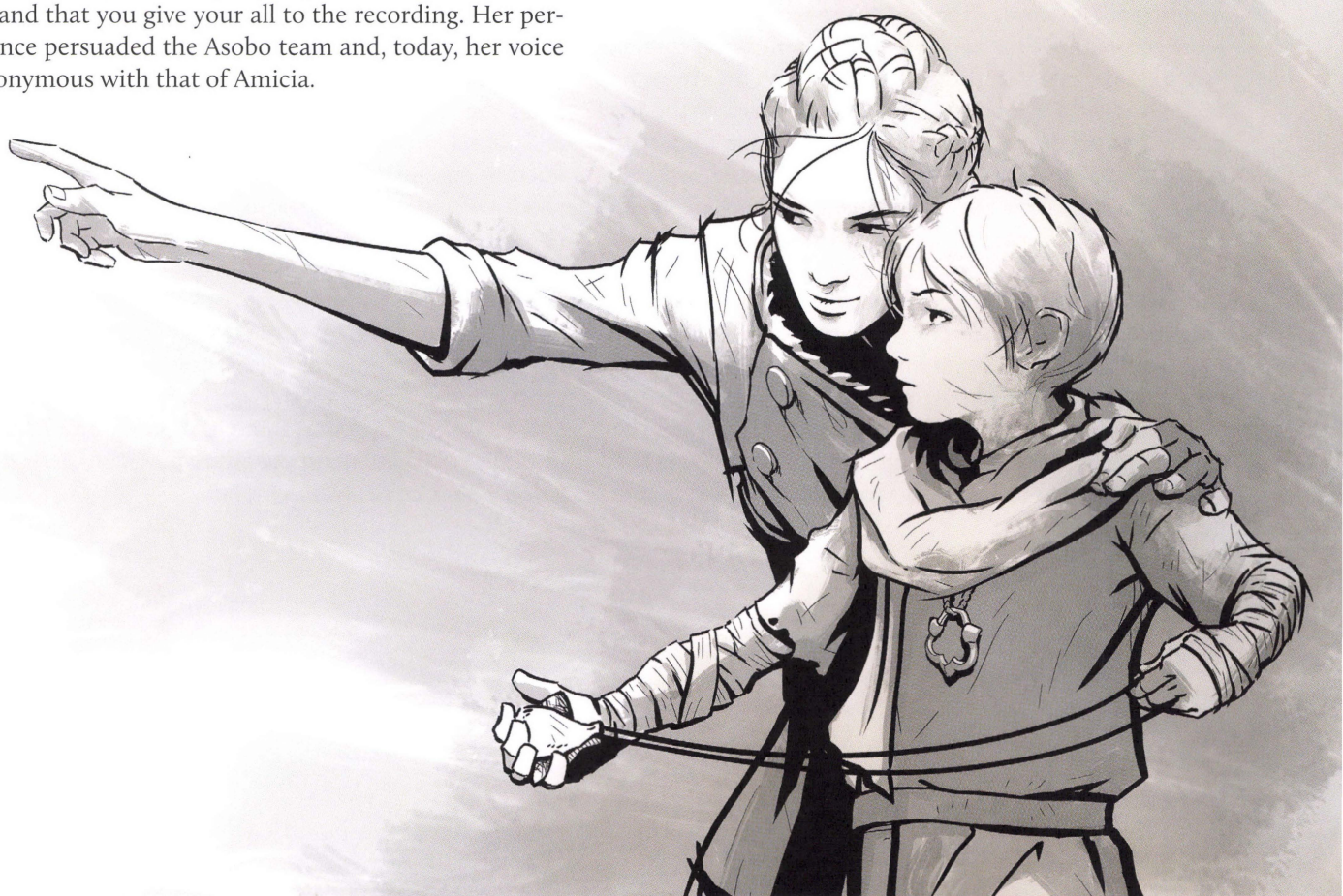
13. At Asobo, the level builders have a more artistic role, handling the backgrounds for the levels, whereas the level designers design the game spaces while bearing in mind the studio's intentions for gameplay.

IN SEARCH OF THE VOICES OF HUGO AND AMICIA

The team turned to the prestigious London-based studio SIDE to handle the casting and recording of the voices. Known for working regularly on Ubisoft games, the recording studio was also responsible for the voices of *Cyberpunk 2077*, *The Witcher III*, and *Hitman*. I'll remind you that the game was first written in English, and thus first had to have the English voices recorded. To play children, studios traditionally use women's voices, but Asobo believed it was important to have Hugo voiced by a boy around the same age. The results of initial tests during casting were not totally satisfying—in fact, if you listen again to the very first trailer for the game released in June 2017, you'll note that the voices of Hugo and Amicia are not the same as those in the final game.

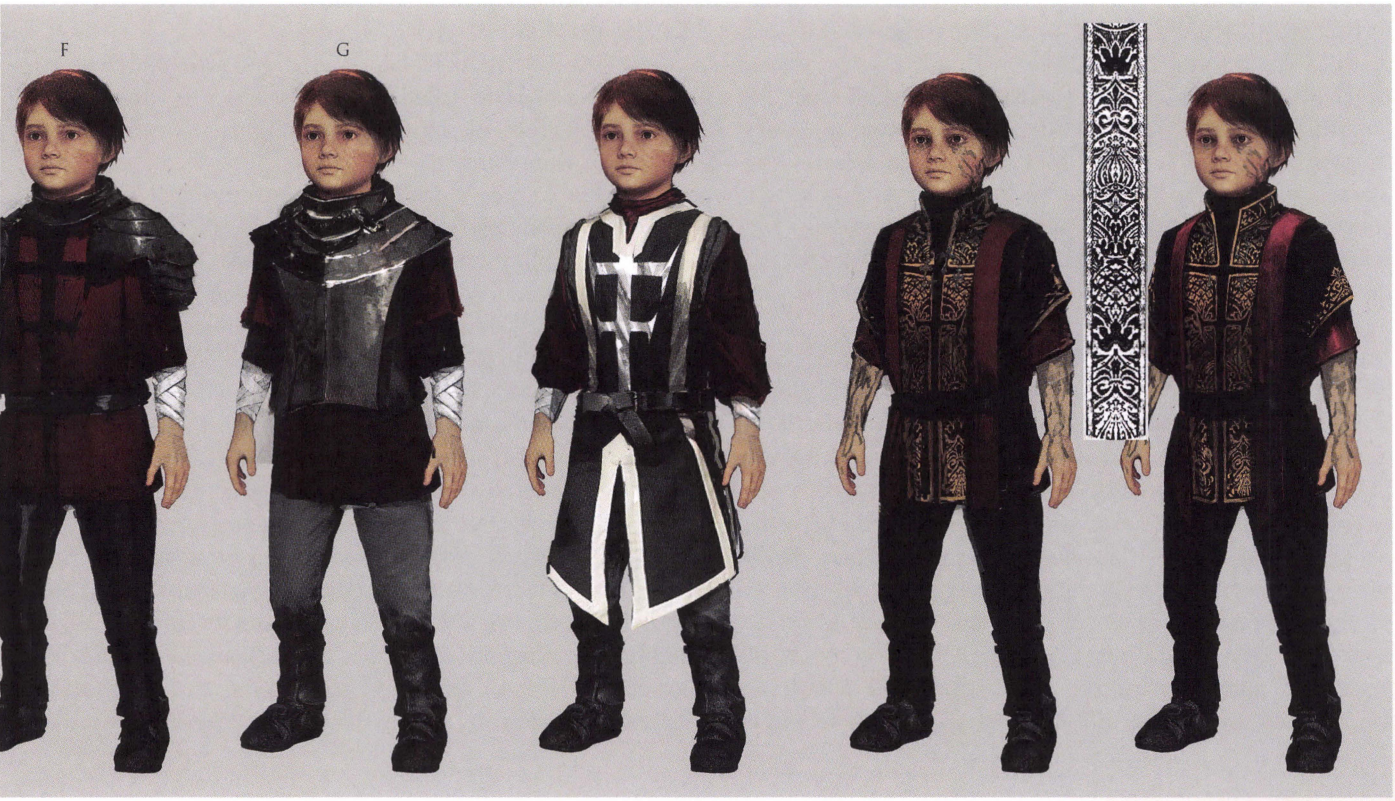
It took some time to convince the members of Asobo Studio to agree to have the British actors use French accents, instead of using more neutral accents. The team's concern had to do with how people would perceive the accent, but the SIDE team was able to reassure them thanks to their expertise. Still, the actors were asked to provide two demos: one using a classic American accent, the other using a French accent. For the voice of Amicia, Charlotte McBurney delivered the strongest performance. Just 17 years old at the time, she had never worked on a video game before, but she proved her talent during the casting process and won over the entire team. Charlotte has said that she particularly liked doing the more dramatic scenes because they require that you put your heart and soul into them and that you give your all to the recording. Her performance persuaded the Asobo team and, today, her voice is synonymous with that of Amicia.

For Hugo, the team had a harder time making a choice because working with such a young child requires that you comply with very strict recording conditions. As Sébastien Renard explains: "In hindsight, every choice we made was very risky. We developed a type of game that we'd never done before, involving children, a fact that comes with a lot of legal implications. The child actors can't do recording sessions for longer than an hour and a half, and we got lucky because with Logan, things worked out perfectly from the beginning." Logan Hannan was not even 10 years old yet when he was cast for the part, and he found himself playing Hugo for over a year, between 2017 and 2018. Here, I'd like to underscore a crucial aspect: for most of the production, the members of Asobo Studio didn't have the voices of the characters and thus played the game without dubbing. However, they still had to take into account the duration of dialogue in the dimensions of the levels, and since they were no longer using the voices of friends and family, the team resorted to automatic dubbing with computer-generated voices.



This text-to-speech (TTS) audio is devoid of all emotion and all nuance, making the dialogue much harder to understand. An ironic or sarcastic line is delivered with the same intonation as a cry of astonishment upon discovering a dead character, for example. As such, the team had to really use their imaginations to get an idea of the final game. As such, for the Asobo team, being able to hear the actual voices of Amicia and Hugo felt liberating, especially since Charlotte and Logan managed to bring to life the full range of emotions imagined by Sébastien Renard, who was in regular contact with the recording studio. Renard specifically remembers the first time he heard Amicia's long monologue in chapter 13, a particularly difficult passage for the character, who finds herself on the borderline between reality and hallucination: "Just hearing it, I got chills. Charlotte's work is brilliant and for chapter 13, when we received the voice recordings, we concurred as a team that we needed to design a level to match the quality of her performance."

This anecdote helped me understand the extent to which game development requires that you imagine the final product. Moreover, I got the opportunity to listen to and play sequences dubbed with the robotic voices, and it felt like I was playing an entirely different game. It also takes the same mental gymnastics to imagine the music and sound effects, which were integrated late in the production process. That's one factor that explains the complexity of video game development: the more ambitious the game, the more likely it is that the different pieces won't be put together until the final months of the project. While the voices were being recorded, the Asobo Studio team continued with its production schedule and prepared to enter the beta testing phase, one of the final stages in production before the final version. One thing the team didn't take into account, though, was an audit performed in summer 2018 that put the entire project in peril, dealing a heavy blow to the team's morale.


F
G

PLAYTESTING AND METACRITIC

Initially, the game's release was set for late 2018. Three months before beta testing started, a new playtesting session was organized to evaluate the work completed up to that point. In July of that year, the studio turned to a consulting firm and tasked them with playing the game, which was playable, though far from its finished form. As I mentioned before, many games conduct various playtests throughout production in order to get feedback on the work completed. In this case, in spite of the team's best efforts, the testers reported numerous weaknesses in the version they played. From the rhythm of the adventure, to the level of difficulty, to the overall enjoyment, the results were very disappointing.

For the testers, in addition to giving detailed comments, it's customary to offer an evaluation of the game. Most often, this evaluation takes the form of a true/false test similar to the assessments done by video game media. This exercise is known as a "ghost review" because it's not intended to be shared with anyone outside of the developer and the publisher. The idea is to imagine how video game critics would react if the game were to be released at the time the true/false test is done, and thus to estimate how the media would rate the game. Over the course of my career, since moving out of editorial staff positions, I've had the opportunity to write dozens of reviews and a number of ghost reviews. I bring this up to explain that I'm accustomed to rating games, and although it's a subject of frequent debate, the fact is that ratings carry a lot of weight in the video game industry.

On a side note here, I'd like to briefly explain the role and function of a website called *Metacritic*, which is simply a review score aggregator. The website weights the rating from each publication using opaque criteria, and after a game has been rated by four or more media organizations, it receives a Metascore. It's an aggregated score out of 100, but contrary to what you may expect, the average for video games is not 50, but rather 70 out of 100. To explain this mathematical contortion, I have to note that the media tend to give favorable ratings to games, the quality of which has improved over time. Naturally, as a result, an average of 50 out of 100 is not what we see in practice and, today, a game that receives a score of 70 out of 100 is considered average. Critically acclaimed games generally have a score above 90 and, of course, studios want to receive the highest score possible.

While this whole system may seem a bit strange at first glance, the Metacritic score is taken very seriously by many players in the video game industry, first and foremost those financing the game productions. I previously explained the distinction between AA and AAA productions, a categorization inspired by bond rating systems. For example, every American

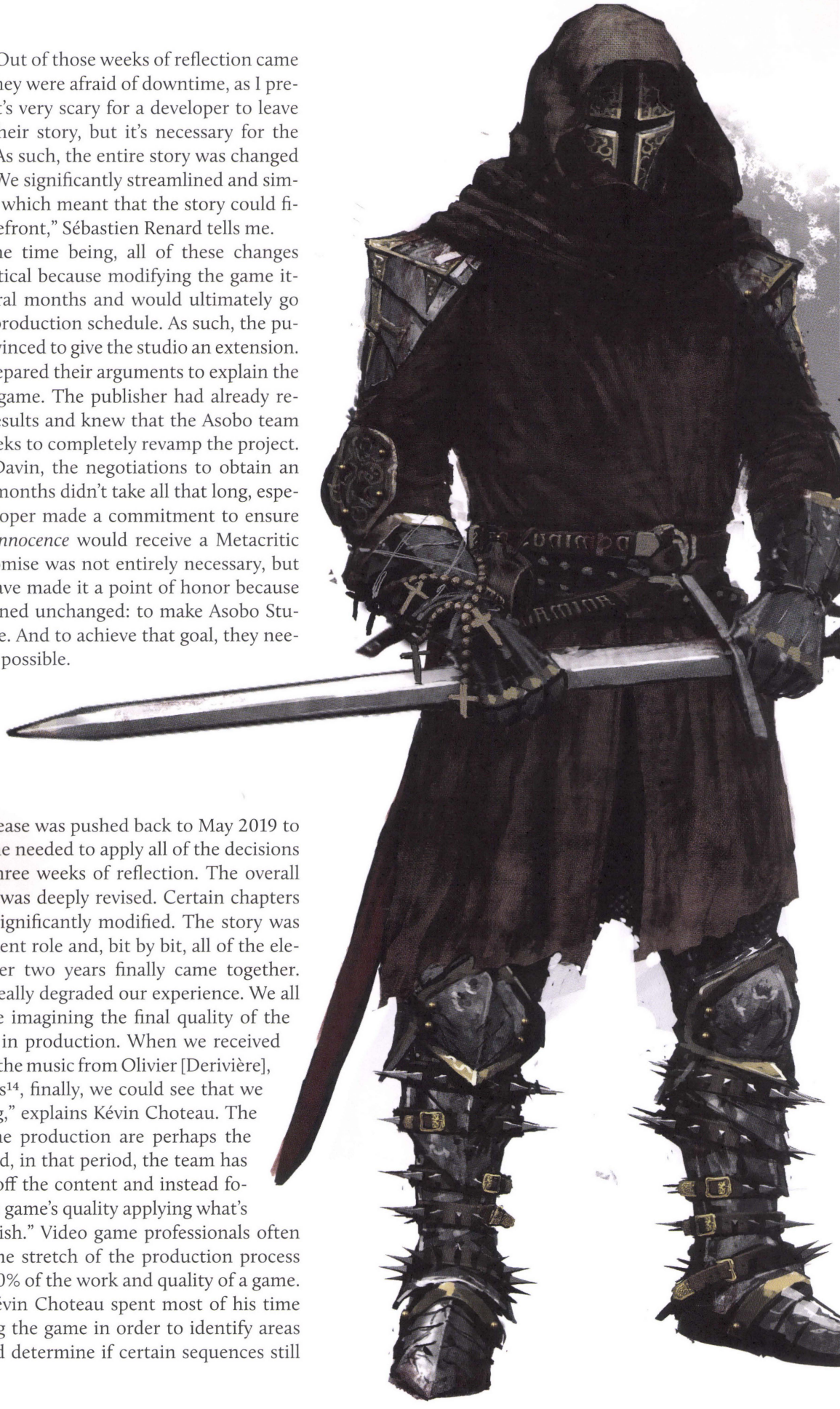
city that wants to borrow money has a credit rating, the highest being AAA, then AA, then A, etc. That rating indicates the city's ability to pay back what they borrow and strongly influences how expensive it will be to borrow funds needed for infrastructure projects, for example. Similarly, the Metascore is perceived in the video game industry as a marker of quality: that means a studio that's able to obtain high scores will have greater leverage in negotiations with a publisher.

Returning to *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, after that playtest session, the consultants estimated that the game would receive a score below the average of 70, which represents a total failure, well below the studio's ambitions. The team had a particularly difficult time taking that blow to their morale. In response, they made an unusual decision: they paused production to revamp their production schedule. That break gave them the opportunity to take the time they needed to identify the game's weaknesses, create new prototypes, and above all... to play the game. It may seem surprising, but most developers don't have the time to play their games before they're released. However, in this case, as Brice Davin explains, "every department got involved to revamp the game and to provide feedback on every aspect." They gave every team member the opportunity to give input and receiving numerous points of view proved to be beneficial for the project overall.

Talking about this particularly difficult period, the team tells me that such feedback is hard to swallow, but it's crucial for the game's quality. Far from throwing in the towel, everyone took time to give their opinions and share ideas, no matter their specialty. This fairly open communication within the team is a strength, according to Kévin Choteau, who recognizes that it's easier to maintain such exchanges when there are only a few dozen people working

on the same project. Out of those weeks of reflection came the realization that they were afraid of downtime, as I previously mentioned. It's very scary for a developer to leave breathing room in their story, but it's necessary for the quality of the game. As such, the entire story was changed during that period. "We significantly streamlined and simplified the gameplay, which meant that the story could finally move to the forefront," Sébastien Renard tells me.

Of course, for the time being, all of these changes were purely hypothetical because modifying the game itself would take several months and would ultimately go beyond the original production schedule. As such, the publisher had to be convinced to give the studio an extension. For that, the team prepared their arguments to explain the benefit for the final game. The publisher had already received the playtest results and knew that the Asobo team had taken several weeks to completely revamp the project. According to Brice Davin, the negotiations to obtain an extension of several months didn't take all that long, especially since the developer made a commitment to ensure that *A Plague Tale: Innocence* would receive a Metacritic score of 80. This promise was not entirely necessary, but the team seems to have made it a point of honor because their objective remained unchanged: to make Asobo Studio known worldwide. And to achieve that goal, they needed to aim as high as possible.



FINAL ASSEMBLY

So, the game's release was pushed back to May 2019 to give the team the time needed to apply all of the decisions made during their three weeks of reflection. The overall rhythm of the game was deeply revised. Certain chapters were eliminated or significantly modified. The story was given a more prominent role and, bit by bit, all of the elements developed over two years finally came together. "The robotic voices really degraded our experience. We all had a very hard time imagining the final quality of the game until very late in production. When we received the voice recordings, the music from Olivier [Derivière], and the first previews[14], finally, we could see that we were onto something," explains Kévin Choteau. The final months of game production are perhaps the most complex. Indeed, in that period, the team has to keep their hands off the content and instead focus on improving the game's quality applying what's called a layer of "polish." Video game professionals often explain that the home stretch of the production process actually represents 90% of the work and quality of a game. During that time, Kévin Choteau spent most of his time playing and replaying the game in order to identify areas for improvement and determine if certain sequences still needed to be cut.

14. In April 2019, the publisher, Focus Entertainment, held an event entitled What's Next, in which the game was presented in a playable version to journalists and influencers for the first time. During that event, I got to check out the final game and meet the team.

One such adjustment was made to the ending of the game, whose story was broken up into 16 chapters, culminating in a battle with the Grand Inquisitor Vitalis. After hours of play, the team got the impression that the ending was too abrupt as it was, and the idea of adding a seventeenth chapter as an epilogue came as the natural solution. The epilogue, although shorter than most of the other levels, added a healthy slowdown in the rhythm while leaving the ending more open. Making this kind of change to a game's content a matter of months before its release is a very risky move, and it's important to note that production actually stops well before the official release. To be approved by the console makers (in this case, Microsoft and Sony), each game must go through a certification process with those companies. As such, at the end of production, messing with the game's content is out of the question because doing so can jeopardize the certification and thus the game's availability in stores for the different consoles. The only authorized changes concern fixes for bugs, and these now take the form of what we typically call a "day-one patch," which is an update made available at the same time that the video game enters circulation.

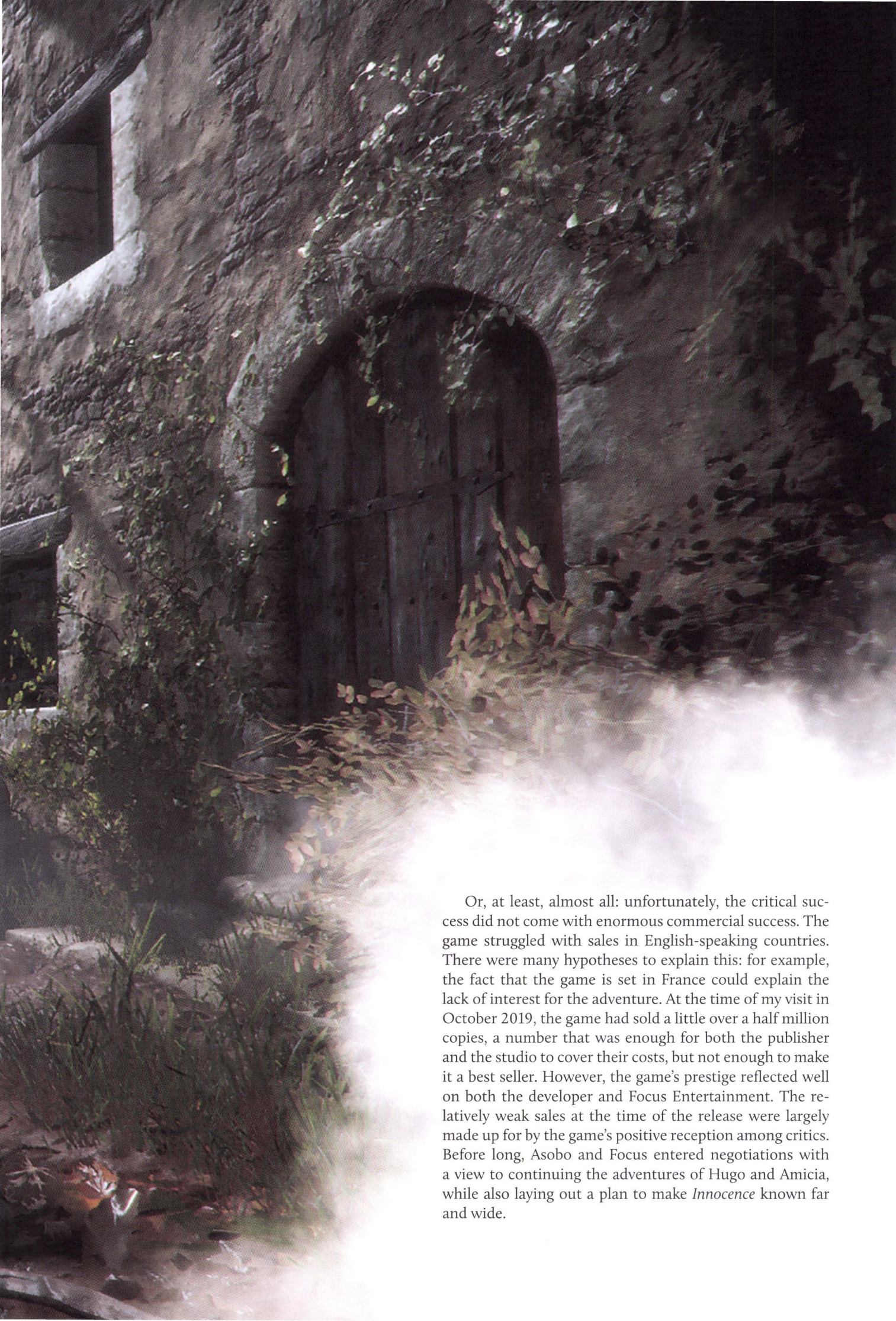
The certification process differs slightly from one console maker to the next, but the goal remains the same: to ensure that the game functions under all circumstances. Such considerations range from ancillary aspects, like the proper display of the buttons for each controller, which differ between consoles, to much more technical aspects, for example, how saving is handled. Beyond specific criteria for each console, the game's stability is also tested, and if a bug proves to be an obstruction for players, a version can be rejected and the developer will have to produce an update. It's partially for this reason that the final months of production are so stressful and complicated. In addition to having to fix bugs to prepare the day-one patch, marketing ramps up as the release date approaches. On the one hand, the versions that will hit the shelves have to be prepared; on the other hand, test versions of the game have to be sent to video game media to ensure that they'll be talking about the game from day one.

THE GAME'S RELEASE

In the course of our conversations, everyone at Asobo talked about the game's release and the weeks that followed as a unique time full of emotions. As it was their first story-driven game, they felt immense fear that it would disappoint audiences or not achieve their goal. After spending years in gestation, *A Plague Tale* was finally in the hands of a number of people worldwide: critics, of course, but also content creators who would share their experiences on YouTube and Twitch. Some influencers were paid to play the game when it was released: for example, this was the case with Lirik[15], who presented the game to over 20,000 viewers on the evening of the release. "We all stopped what we were doing to watch Lirik play the game for the first time. He was only supposed to play for two hours; he ended up doing a five-hour session. Then, he continued playing the game the next day to finish it," Kévin Choteau tells me. He continues, "When the game was released, we couldn't wrap our minds around what was happening. We were in our own little bubble because we were terrified, and we could see people all over the world liking the game. It was crazy!"

15. Real name Saqib Ali Zahid, Lirik is an American streamer whose Twitch channel has close to 3 million subscribers.

Amused, he explains to me that, "what's funny is that the game's budget didn't provide for a month of rest while we just enjoyed the results. Reality required us to keep working, but there really was a month where we were on cloud nine." Indeed, *A Plague Tale: Innoc*ence received an excellent reception from critics. The team exceeded its Metacritic score goal, with the game stabilizing between 81 and 83, depending on the platform. Each point above 80 is a huge step up and, at that point in time, it was the best-rated game ever produced by Asobo Studio. Since then, *Flight Simulator* shattered the record, surpassing the symbolic bar of 90 out of 100, but for the team, it was a real victory. *A Plague Tale: Innocence* was hailed for the quality of its dialogue, characters, music, and emotional impact. Less than a year after the playtest that threw everything into question, the Bordeaux-based team set things right and managed to achieve all of their objectives.



Or, at least, almost all: unfortunately, the critical success did not come with enormous commercial success. The game struggled with sales in English-speaking countries. There were many hypotheses to explain this: for example, the fact that the game is set in France could explain the lack of interest for the adventure. At the time of my visit in October 2019, the game had sold a little over a half million copies, a number that was enough for both the publisher and the studio to cover their costs, but not enough to make it a best seller. However, the game's prestige reflected well on both the developer and Focus Entertainment. The relatively weak sales at the time of the release were largely made up for by the game's positive reception among critics. Before long, Asobo and Focus entered negotiations with a view to continuing the adventures of Hugo and Amicia, while also laying out a plan to make *Innocence* known far and wide.

POSTLAUNCH: GETTING THE WORLD OUT ABOUT *INNOCENCE*

This final stage in the creative process has become essential over the years. Called the "postlaunch" in the business, it covers the life of a video game after its release. Aurélie Belzanne, media relations and marketing manager, was in charge of this period. In the past, when updates over the internet and digital distribution were not yet the norm, most of a game's sales were made in the weeks immediately following its release. Of course, studios would sometimes produce content expansions, but that didn't happen with most games. With expanded use of the internet and online sales, half of sales in the video game industry[16] are now made via online platforms. The second-hand PC game market has disappeared and it's on the way out for consoles. This change makes it easier to sell games over the long term. Of course, that means evolution of consumption habits and constant sales all year long encouraging purchases well after the release. Access to video games has also been facilitated by the rise of subscriptions, notably Microsoft's Game Pass, which had around 18 million subscribers in 2021. And Microsoft is not the only one with such an offer: PlayStation has PlayStation Plus, and Epic Games, since the launch of its Epic Games Store in December 2019, regularly offers new games.

A Plague Tale: Innocence has benefited significantly from the exposure offered by these modern platforms. It was added to the Game Pass catalogue in January 2020 and its sequel, *A Plague Tale: Requiem*, will also be available to subscribers of the Microsoft service from the day of its release. Asobo's efforts haven't stopped there: an improved version of *Innocence* was developed for the new-generation consoles, a purely technical project handled in-house by a team of five people. A Nintendo Switch version was planned for a time, but that idea was quickly scrapped because of calculations related to thousands of rats displayed on the screen. Still, the game can, in fact, be played on the hybrid console thanks to cloud gaming. Once again, the sequel will also be playable via this same method from the time of its release.

The improved version was released in July 2021 and, for that entire month, the game was offered to PlayStation Plus subscribers to really drive players to it. To finish, the game was offered for the PC in August of the same year through the Epic Games Store. While, from a player point of view, these offers through subscription services seem like gifts, in reality, they are investments for the online stores, who pay the studios in order to offer their games for free. This evolution of mindsets is changing the way in which the success of a video game is measured. Gradually, we are no longer counting so much the sales of units, but rather the number of players when evaluating the success of a game.

16. According to SELL's 2020 annual market report: *https://www.sell.fr/news/bilan-marche-jeu-video-2020*.

As Brice Davin explains, this change is upending habits, but the goal has largely been achieved because *A Plague Tale: Innocence* has made its way into the hands of millions of people over the months. All of the efforts to support this first episode in a series have produced excellent results. During my second visit to the studio in November 2021, Brice proudly told me that over 2 million people had played the game. In addition to the digital offers and improved versions, it has regularly been talked about in the media, with several nominations for awards. As early as 2019, *A Plague Tale* has been hailed by Steam users for its storytelling. It even made an appearance at the Video Game Awards in December of that same year, having been nominated for the Best Narrative category. That gained enormous media exposure for the game, as the Video Game Awards have become the most important award ceremony in the industry. With over 45 million viewers worldwide, the team was well aware of the importance of the moment and created a special trailer to mark the occasion. In 2020, the game also received accolades at the NAVGTR Awards, given by professionals from video game media. It also dominated the first French "Pégases," winning six of the seven awards for which it was nominated.

To conclude, I can also mention the notable increase observed in the number of user reviews on the game's Steam page. Steam, the online store of game developer Valve, has totally dominated the PC gaming market for over 15 years and continues to grow, receiving up to 27 million users a day[17]. Reaching a large audience amidst thousands of games is no easy task, and the platform uses a recommendation algorithm that notably relies on the number of user reviews and ratings earned. While this indicator doesn't have the same weight as the Metascore, it's used in several ways and, particularly, can be used to estimate a game's sales. This method was especially used before Steam authorized developers to report their sales numbers. What we know now is that there's a correlation between the number of reviews and the number of sales. In other words: the more a game sells, the more reviews it receives, and thus the more it may be suggested by the platform's algorithm. In October 2019, *A Plague Tale: Innocence* had 4,800 reviews on Steam, 94% of which were positive. Two years later, that figure had fallen by one point to 93%, but the game had been reviewed by over 34,000 people, seven times the previous total. That provided reassurance for the success of the sequel, which was released in October 2022.

17. This record was surpassed on November 29, 2021.

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

Before we get into the final part of this Creation chapter, I'd like to warn you that as I write these words, the game's production is not yet finished and the Asobo Studio team still has several months of work left. As the different stages in the creative process are, in many ways, the same as those described for *Innocence*, I will mainly focus on the differences between the two games to explain the challenges the team had to face and the obstacles they had to overcome. In my experience, just like how the game shows its true face when all of its components are put together, that's also when the most complex problems surface. In the words of Brice Davin, "the last 20% of a production is the most complex part," because in spite of the studio's experience and all of the lessons learned from the development of *Innocence*, the creation of a video game is not in any way an exact science.

MAKING "A TRUE SEQUEL"

That had to be the idea that came up most often in my conversations with Kévin Choteau, who explains: "We don't want to just make a version 1.5 of the original game." For the game director and his team, the goal is to lean on the lessons learned from the first episode in order to have the adventures of Amicia and Hugo finish in a blaze of glory. While the team was still riding high on the euphoria from the release of *Innocence*, work resumed and the incubation of a new project began shortly thereafter. The team performed what's called a "post-mortem," an analysis after the fact of the strengths and weaknesses of the game, but also of the organization and tools. It didn't take long to lay the foundations of the story, and Sébastien Renard had a fairly clear idea of the fates in store for his characters. For a time, the sequel was subtitled *Outburst*, with the intention of contrasting with Hugo's initial *Innocence*. The new title was not unanimously loved and, during a conversation with the publisher Focus, the idea of instead using *Requiem* was brought up, and then selected as the game's official subtitle. The Latin word *requiem* refers to a prayer for the dead, a funeral hymn, which leaves us with little doubt about the possibility of a happy ending for Amicia and Hugo.

The negotiations with Focus regarding the development of the sequel concluded relatively quickly, as the two partners were satisfied with their collaboration. Even though Asobo was adopting a risky position with *Requiem*, the team only wanted to develop the game for the new-generation consoles. This was a real gamble since, in 2019, the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S still had not been revealed to the general public, and the game could reach a very wide audience with all the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One machines already in homes. Asobo Studio and many other industry players put their confidence in the new consoles and began preparing future games, though the others didn't necessarily choose like Asobo to look solely to the future. That's one of the realities of video game creation: projecting a few years into the future, hoping that trends and the expectations of players won't completely change. "It was important for us. We have often made games on consoles that were at the end of their life cycles, and for *Requiem*, we want to be at the leading edge," explains Brice Davin. Behind this preference, there's the studio's original desire to distinguish themselves. Unfortunately, no one could have anticipated the global COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties tied to the semiconductor supply chain, hindering the production of the new consoles.

But at the beginning of the process, none of that had yet entered into the day-to-day concerns of Asobo and Focus, who were working on the schedule for the new project, taking care to incorporate the lessons learned from *Innocence*. They weren't going to regret a single thing; on the contrary, "we couldn't have done anything differently at the time. Today, we all want to go further. We see things differently and we feel less like we're using trial and error," explains Kévin Choteau, before adding with a laugh, "let's hope it's not a risk." That phrase stayed with me because it perfectly encapsulates the developers' underlying anxiety: whether you know where you're going or playing it by ear, you're still taking a risk. One thing was for sure: there was no way they would again face a terrible playtest. To avoid that situation, the team included pauses in the schedule between each milestone to allow them to play the game and take a few days to get some perspective. Along the same lines, they have more regular exchanges with the Focus team. According to Loïc Canales, the publisher's line producer[18], their relationship has really benefited.

18. Also sometimes known as an executive producer. In the case of Focus, line producers are the people in charge of the publisher's projects and are in constant contact with the studios.

All of these precautions are there to give the project every chance of succeeding: *Requiem* is a much more ambitious game, and around 70 people are now working on the game's production, almost double the size of the team from the first installment. Most of the leads (i.e., department heads) remain the same, and others have joined the original team. For example, Kévin Pinson and Damien Ciocca have taken the reins of level design, which remains central to creation, with the story, gameplay, and visuals all gravitating around it. While artistic aspects remain under the direction of Olivier Ponsonnet, the number of animators has increased in response to the greater ambitions for the sequel. Animations related to gameplay are under the direction of Andreas Nick, with support, in particular, from Sylvain Fernandes, who's taken the associate lead role. While Julien Guérin was in charge of directing and animation for the cutscenes in *Innocence*, Pascal Le Guinjo is the head of animation for *Requiem* in order to free up time for the directing of numerous filmed sequences, as we'll see later.

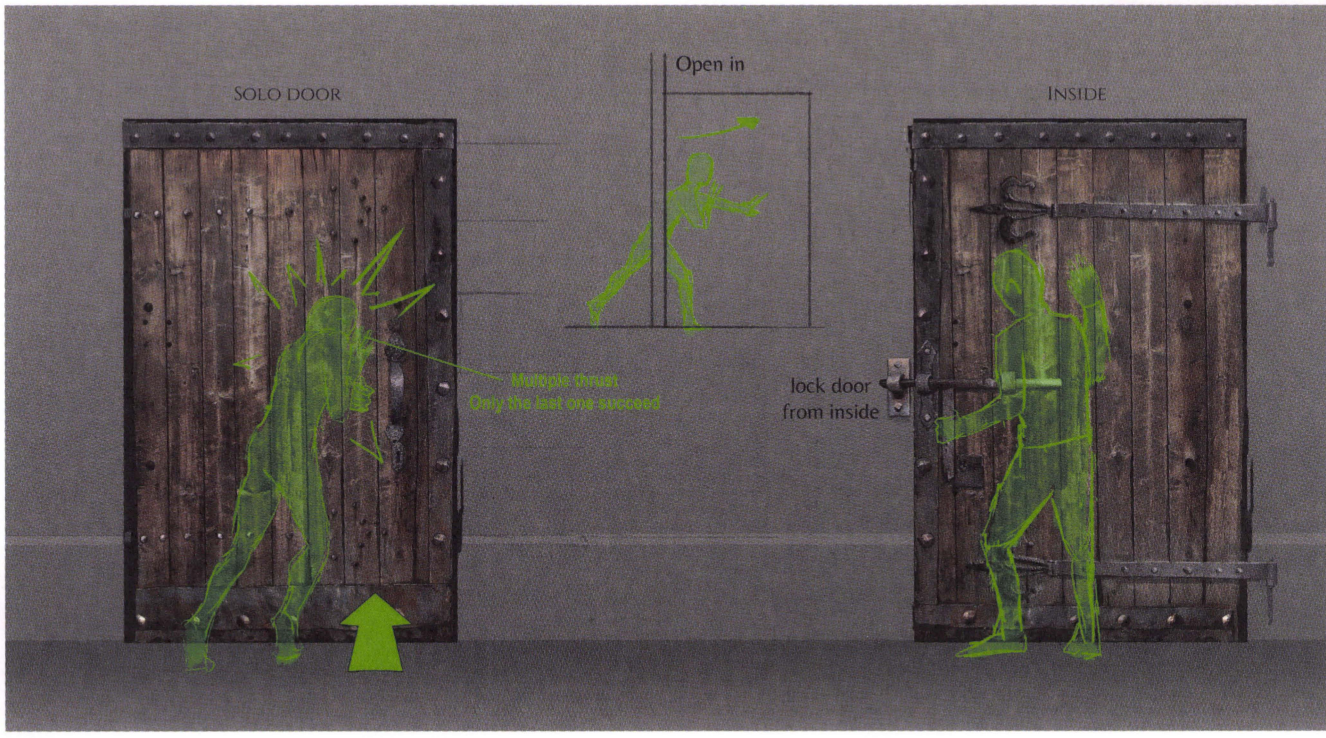
Thus, all departments have been reinforced with several people. The writing of the story and dialogue is shared among several authors. The teams dedicated to level design are bigger: they have more artists and more developers. In short, the objective is to raise the overall quality of the game. That said, they don't have a win in the bag just yet because, as I mentioned previously, the complexity of video game production is such that increasing the budget and the size of the team does not automatically make a game better or easier to develop. In fact, it can be quite the opposite. The greater the ambitions for a project, the greater the ramifications and consequences behind each decision made, and that only makes it more complex to organize teams. With the end goal being to create "a true sequel," many aspects of the original game have been revised and improved to fit with the team's ambitions.

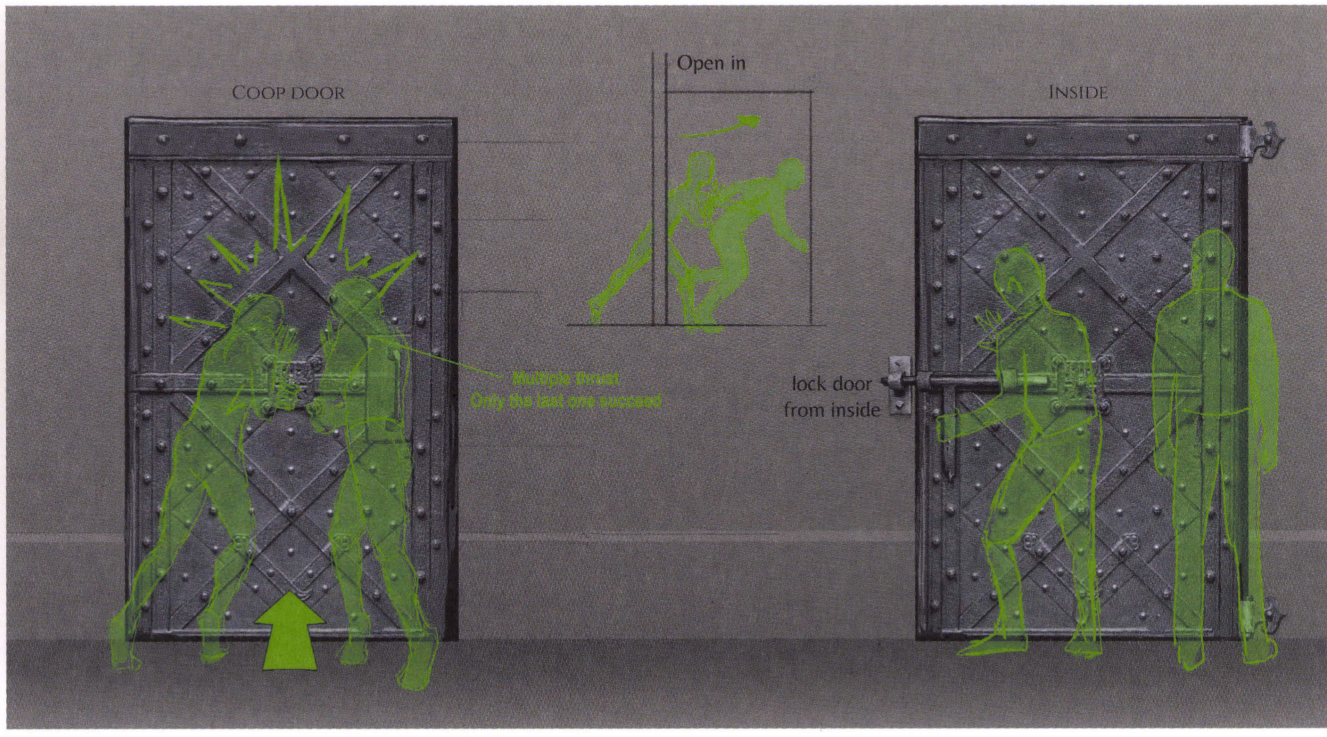
ignifer
∞

CROSSBOW AND SYSTEM-BASED GAMEPLAY

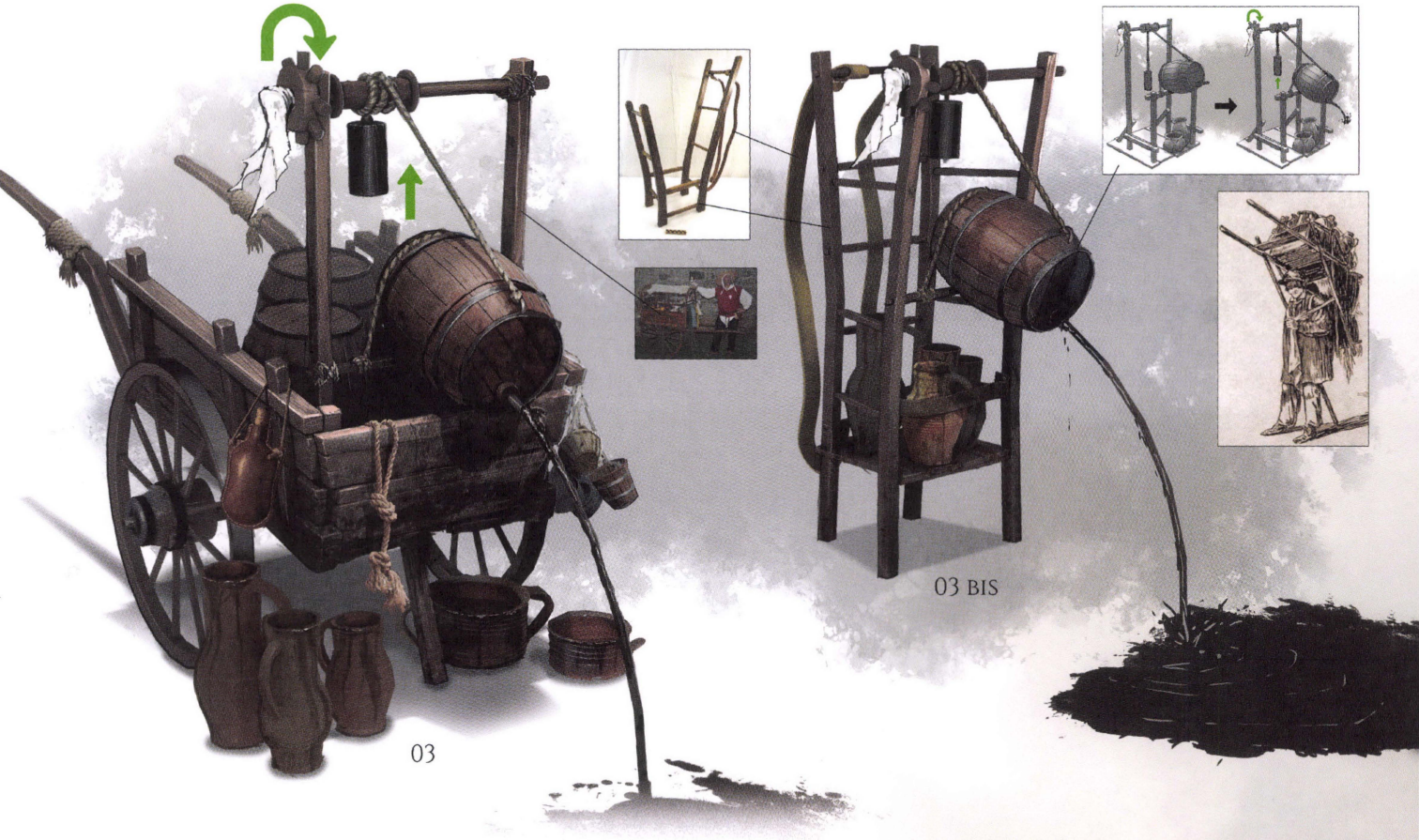
At the time of my first visit in October 2019, the members of Asobo Studio were working on creating a new vertical slice, this one designed to last around 40 minutes. They chose this unusual format because of the number of new features introduced in the sequel: these cover all aspects of the game, from the visual rendering, to animations, to the story, to gameplay. That's one of the top objectives for *Requiem*: to keep the stealth-game approach from *Innocence* while offering players new possibilities. In addition to her signature slingshot, Amicia will now be able to use a crossbow, which she will use both to defend herself and to solve rat-related puzzles. Moreover, the vertical slice ended with the appearance of a massive wave of rats, which, at the time, was already very impressive in spite of all the work left to be completed. The visual rendering gave me a good idea of the team's ambitions, and the amount of detail on the screen was the same as, or even better than, what we saw in the first installment. Everything was thought out to take the game further, and the addition of the crossbow is one of the ingredients in the recipe used for the overall gameplay.

The idea is not to make Amicia a war machine, as the crossbow is a weapon that takes particularly long to reload and the bolts are a precious resource only to be used in a dire emergency. However, the fact that the bolts remain planted in a surface gave the team the opportunity to use the weapon for things other than combat. "We want to move away from the philosophy of the first installment, according to which each area had only one correct solution," explains Kévin Choteau, adding: "For the sequel, we want to give players more tools so that they have greater freedom, but without overcomplicating game phases." Their efforts are focused on implementing "game systems," which are elements that can interact with each other and be used creatively by players. In concrete terms, *Requiem* leaves the door open to experimentation, and the easiest way to explain this is through an example.

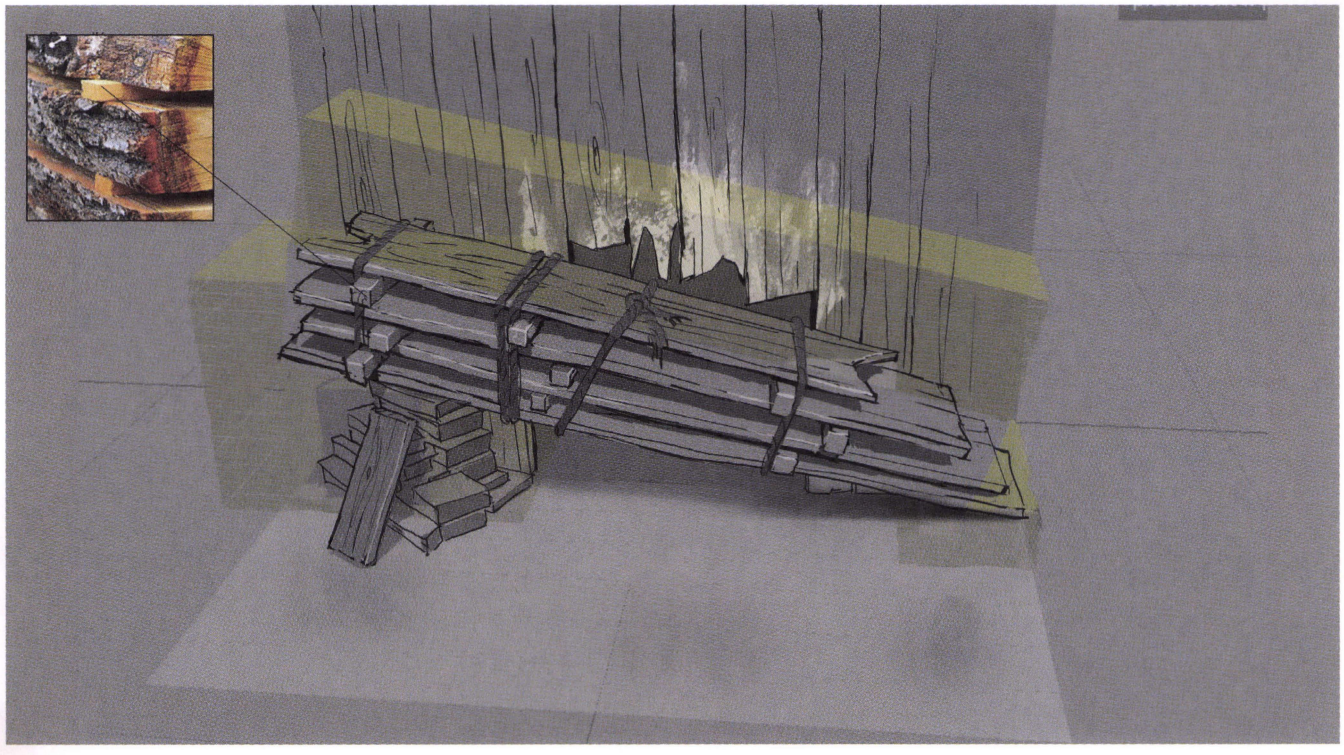

SOLO DOOR
Open in
INSIDE
Multiple thrust
Only the last one succeed
lock door
from inside

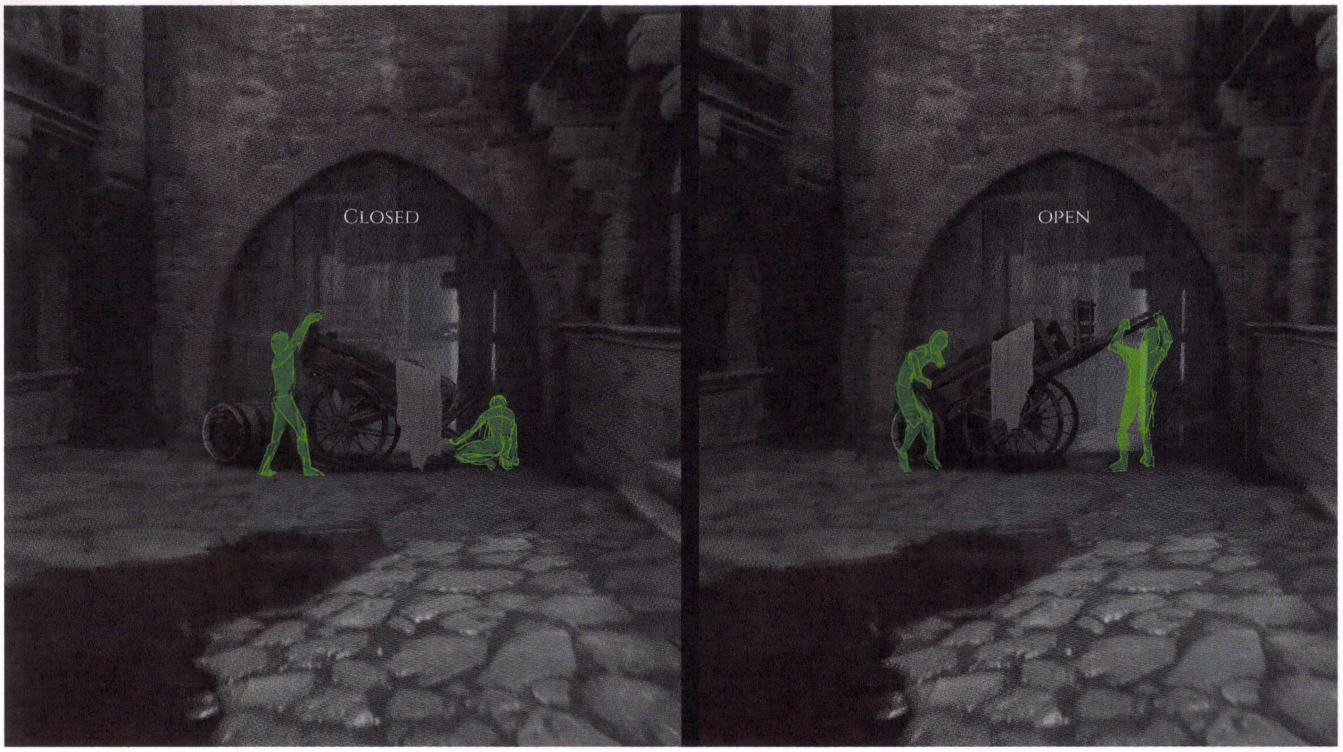

COOP DOOR
Open in
INSIDE
Multiple thrust
Only the last one succeed
lock door
from inside

One of the first prototypes that I got to check out involved the usage of a jar of oil: it could be thrown in order to create a flammable surface. With that, you can create a patch of light to force the rats to flee, to attract guards, or to burn them. The nuance provided by such a system is that you can use these rules—these laws, if you will—anywhere in the game, not just in specific places. The developers agree to give up a bit of control in order to give players greater freedom. This philosophy is found in many more recent games, with the best example, in my opinion, being *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, whose entire game design relies on the pleasure of experimentation. The fact that a similar approach is being applied to *A Plague Tale: Requiem* fits perfectly with the studio's desire to create a true sequel: we see a clear evolution, and the team is willing to wait and see what happens once the game is in the hands of players.



The interest from a gaming point of view is obvious. However, for the developers, it required many changes. First, the interface and the various menus were entirely redesigned in order to give players total control over their equipment and tools. The goal is to not break up the game's rhythm or otherwise risk setting off a chain reaction because of an incorrect selection from the menus. After several iterations of the interface during the alpha phase, feedback from playtests suggested that the team still needed to work on this aspect in order to refine and not bog down the gameplay. The other area of work concerned level design: while overall the game remains linear, the levels now have larger areas in which players will be able to choose their approaches. Due to their mechanics, these areas slow down the game's pace a bit and, as is always the case with *A Plague Tale*, there has to be a narrative justification for each of these places. Scene-setting remains one of the cornerstones of this sequel, and just as these open areas change the rhythm of the adventure, the level designers have also worked on creating impressive chase scenes.




CLOSED
OPEN

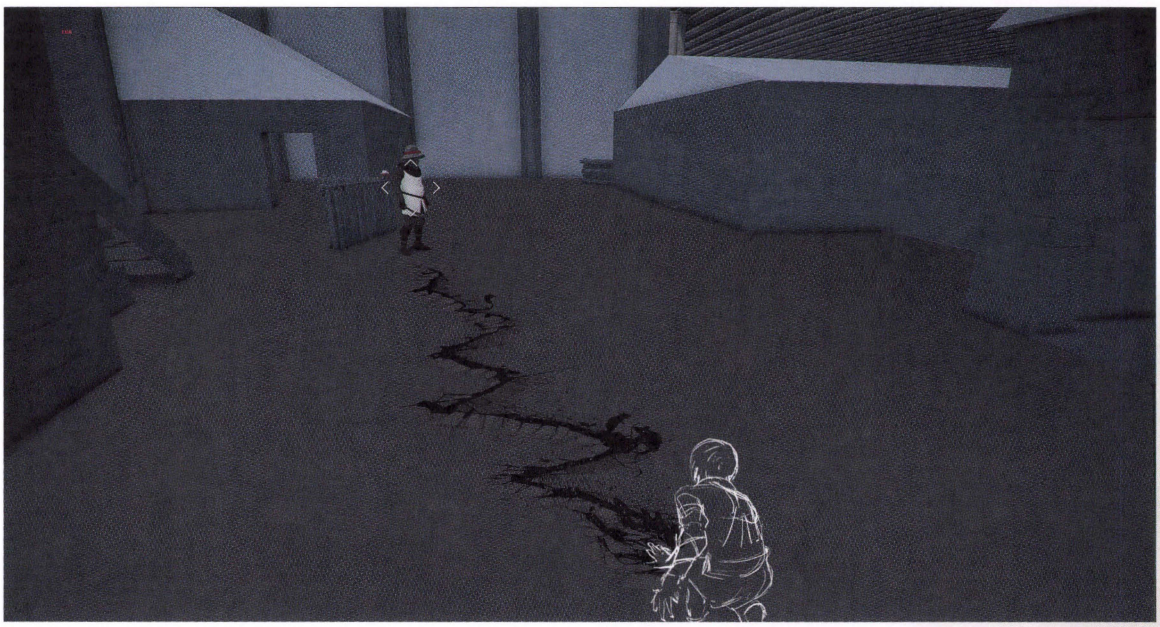
CLOSED
OPEN

WAVES OF RATS AND HIGH-SPEED CHASES

It's a fact: rats are at the heart of the *Plague Tale* series. In fact, we'll spend some time discussing their role in the chapter dedicated to decoding the series. The rats' link with the Plague and with Hugo's power makes them full-fledged characters in the plot, and for *Requiem*, they'll get to show their power thanks to the addition of waves of rats. This calamity is intimately linked with Hugo's emotions and that explains why the game was once subtitled *Outburst*. These tsunamis of rats, as the Asobo team calls them, are the result of an idea that came about very early in the research conducted by the artists and game designers. On paper, the wave of rats makes for a very impressive bit of stagecraft: imagine a wave made up of tens of thousands of rats, a wave capable of razing an entire village in minutes. However, the technical challenge tied to their appearance was massive, and even though the technical capabilities of the new consoles make it possible to display more and more rats on the screen, these waves are reserved for key moments in the adventure.

Each aspect of the game must be justified by the story and it's important to not play the "rat wave" card too often so as to not weaken their visual and emotional impact. As such, the player can't personally control the waves of rats, and their appearance always triggers a fleeing sequence. For Kévin Pinson, the lead level designer, these scenes were his favorite to design, and he has no problem admitting that he took inspiration, in particular, from the work of Naughty Dog with the series *Uncharted*. For Pinson, the secret to success is found in the rhythm and camera movements: "You have to be able to show the waves of rats without the entire sequence playing out with the camera facing Amicia." The incredibly meticulous level designer breaks up a sequence into dozens of fragments, each a few seconds long, in order to orchestrate every step and leave nothing up to chance.

FX soundWave



Rat Grip

They're a lot like particularly expensive shots in film (a.k.a. "money shots"), very short, intense sequences that are very memorable, so much so that they're quite often used in movie trailers. If this topic interests you, I recommend that you carefully watch the chase scene in Madagascar in the game *Uncharted 4*, a sequence that lasts around nine minutes and yet required over a year of work by dozens of people. That investment may seem out of proportion, but the result is still impressive to this day. "The changes in camera angle, for example, are perfectly managed. You must never lose players; they have to know where to go while feeling like they're out of breath," explains Kévin Pinson as we watched the famous sequence together. Thus, the developers go over every step in a chase with a fine-tooth comb: the lighting, the forms of the buildings, the sound, etc. Every aspect must contribute to the extreme nature of the moment while giving clues to indicate the path to follow.

I also got the chance to view one of these chase sequences in *Requiem* at various stages in its production, noting in version after version the improvements and the Asobo team's attention to detail. While Asobo may not have the same resources as Naughty Dog, they are still committed to demonstrating their expertise by making the most of the resources they do have at their disposal. That's one of the facets of their identity that I've described throughout this chapter.

After the improvements to gameplay and level design, the final major area of work for *Requiem* concerns the story. *Requiem* is, first and foremost, a story-driven game, and its success will largely depend on the quality of its story, of its many pieces of dialogue, and its dozens of cutscenes. Additionally, one of the few negatives I observed in *Innocence* was this: the lack of real modeling of the characters' facial expressions. It's an aspect that the team is very familiar with as it's been pointed out by other critics. As such, for *Requiem*, the team has put extra effort into this aspect.

H

FROM MOTION CAPTURE TO PERFORMANCE CAPTURE

There are several types of narrative sequences in the game. Some are playable: for example, you hold Hugo's hand and listen to characters in conversation while you explore a level. This "chatter" requires less work to produce on screen and the biggest concern is the duration, as it has to fit with the distance to be traveled. Additionally, for these sequences, the studio applies semi-automated lip-syncing to save time. Other narrative sequences are not playable: internally at Asobo, the team calls them real-time cinematics (RTCs). These sequences use the game's engine and are created by the team using motion capture. The studio has its own film set to maintain its independence with motion capture filming. Asobo has also made investments allowing them to use another technology called "performance capture." To put it simply, motion capture means filming actors dressed in special suits in order to capture their movements, replicate them in the game's engine, and apply them to the characters. The layer added by performance capture is important: the faces of the actors are also filmed to add greater and greater realism to the facial expressions. However, like any technical upgrade in the video game world, this doesn't make things easier for the developers. On the contrary, performance capture comes with many more constraints.

The actors whose faces are filmed are not the same actors who do the voice acting. As such, the voice actors have to dub each scene like you would an animated film. This is a particularly complex change for both the studio and for the voice actors. As such, before filming a cutscene, you have to make sure that no dialogue will be modified later; otherwise, you'll end up with unusable content. After choosing this technology, the Asobo team contacted SIDE, as well as actors Charlotte McBurney and Logan Hannan, to see if they'd be able to work with the new constraints. "Nothing would have been worse than losing the voices of Hugo and Amicia," says Kévin Choteau, continuing, "Both the team and the actors are very attached to these characters and we got really lucky: from the earliest tests, both were perfect. It was very impressive." Another constraint tied to this change: the English dubbing had to be finished completely and approved before starting the recording of the other languages, otherwise risking, once again, the need to make changes after the fact.

In addition to making the dubbing more complex, performance capture meant increasing the level of detail in the 3D models for each character, especially for their faces. The facial animation work was added on top of the overall workload and, like so many other studios, Asobo turned to a team of contractors in Southeast Asia for help. In addition to the faces, one of the most complex aspects in today's video games has to do with points of contact[19] between characters and backgrounds, objects, or other characters. So, a portion of the game's budget was dedicated to teams of contractors tasked with working on the cutscenes to ensure high-quality results. This outsourcing is an aspect of contemporary video games that, while not taboo, is not always discussed transparently by studios, even though more and more teams are resorting to it. That's the flip side of constantly pushing the quality of games to greater and greater heights: the number of people working on the most expensive games is in the hundreds. In my opinion, admitting this fact transparently is important for helping the general public understand the reality of the people working on video game development.

All that said, let's return to *Requiem*. External help has been essential for achieving the desired level of quality because the in-house teams had their work cut out for them with the characters' faces. As a direct consequence of using performance capture, the faces of Amicia and other characters were completely remodeled in order to provide for a greater number of animation points for replicating the actors' emotions. This change had an unexpected side effect: Amicia's expression appears much colder and she seems to have aged slightly, even though only six months pass between the end of *Innocence* and the beginning of *Requiem*. The evolution of her story will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, but I'd like to note here that you can very clearly see the change in the very first trailer for the game, shown at E3 in 2021. In it, we only see her face for a second, but her determined expression, as I see it, illustrates the change in tone between the two games. As the voice-over tells us that she's willing to do whatever it takes for her brother, the video clearly presents the various areas of work mentioned in this last part: the waves of rats, of course, but also the crossbow and the improved visuals.

SURROUNDED BY THE ASOBO TEAM, THE BODY AND FACIAL CAPTURE ACTORS.
From left to right, back to front: Alex Martin (the Count), Robyn Wolf (Amicia), Tom Hudson (Lucas), Chloé Louis (Hugo), Giorgia Sinicorni (Sophia), and Edouard Chény (Arnaud)

19. If this subject interests you, I recommend that you read a blog article that discusses the famous "door problem," the door being a seemingly insignificant object that can quickly become a nightmare to develop: *https://lizengland.com/blog/2014/04/the-door-problem/*

ASOBO

DEVELOPING A GAME IN THE MIDDLE OF A PANDEMIC

As I've mentioned before, developing a video game comes with many risks, but a global pandemic is rarely one of them. And yet, the year 2020 is now inextricably linked with COVID-19. In the case of Asobo Studio, it wasn't so much the disease itself that had an impact on the game's development; rather, it was the move to working remotely. From a purely logistical point of view, the transition went well and it only took a few days for the company's 180 employees to get a work station set up at home. In France, the period of stay-at-home orders began on March 17, 2020, and lasted into May. For the *Requiem*, that corresponded to the period when the game was entering its alpha phase. Although the production didn't get too far behind schedule, teleworking put a spotlight on the importance of a crucial aspect in the daily work of developers: communication. When every little meeting takes place through software, the ties that usually hold a team together prove to be harder to maintain. Very quickly, the project's managers realized this.

As Brice Davin explains: "Managing teams: it's not just about knowing how many people we need working on this or that subject. It's also about knowing where to place them in the office, ensuring that they receive the right information and that they're also able to communicate. Unfortunately, remote work has had an impact on the competitive spirit within the team, and it's taken us some time to hit our stride." As the public health measures relaxed, the possibilities for holding in-person gatherings were seen as a breath of fresh air for the team. Just like with *Innocence*, the development of *Requiem* required the ability to imagine the final product while playing a game that for several years had no voices nor music. In normal times, all team members have to do is get up and go ask the authors for clarification. These exchanges, while ordinary, are essential for understanding the game. Unfortunately, with telework, they all but disappear.

Paradoxically, that's one of the few disadvantages of the level of experience among Asobo's developers. The years spent working side by side made their communication natural, and many decisions could be made simply through informal conversations. As such, remote work had an unexpected impact, and each time the team gathers in-person, the project takes off again. During my second visit to their offices in November 2021, Kévin Choteau told me that "meeting in the same office feels really different. Throughout production, we have moments where morale is at a low point and being able to support one another is important." It just so happened that all of Asobo's employees were preparing to move to new offices and the stress of that was added on top of their everyday concerns.

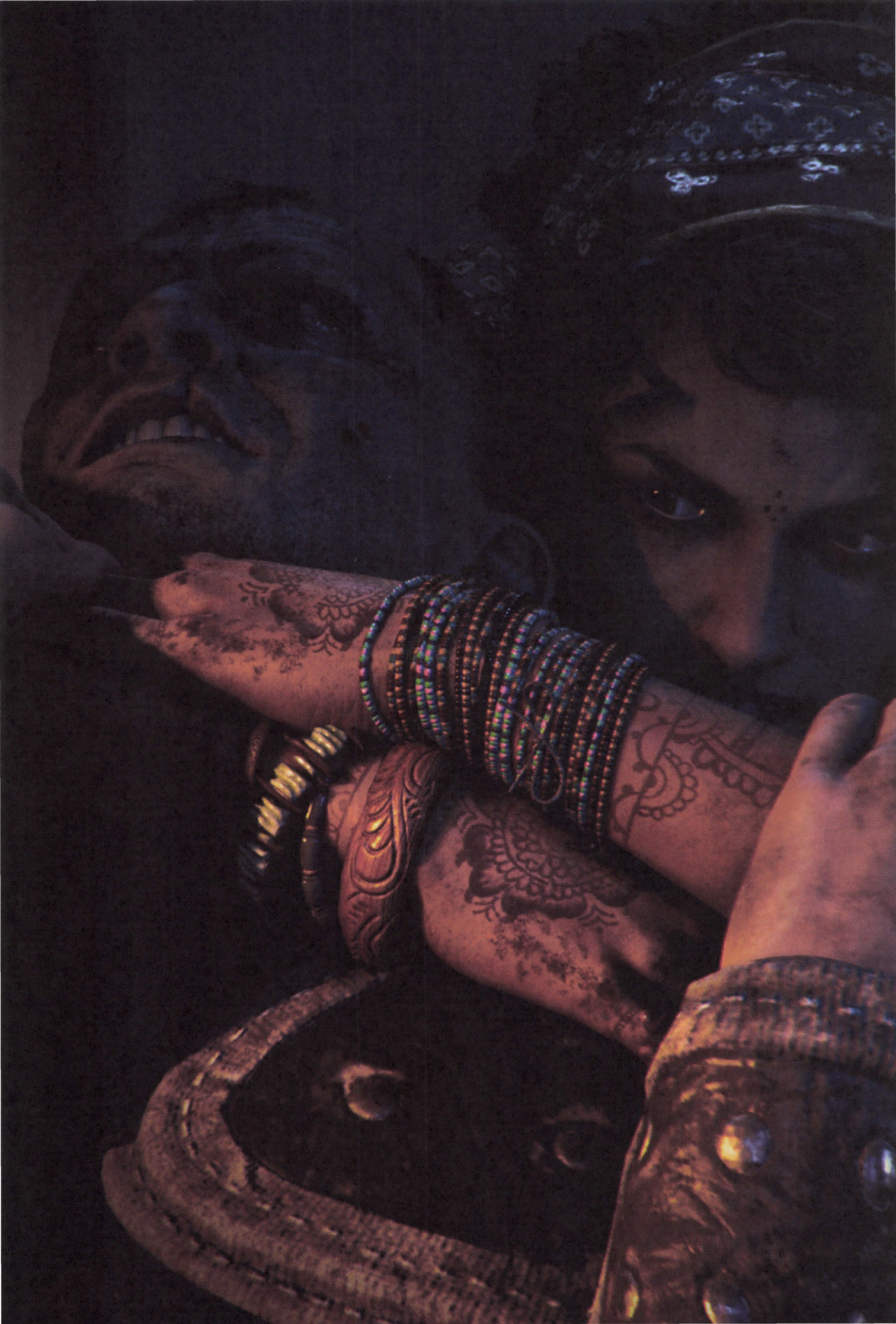
Sadly, the pandemic is far from finished, and although the move to the new offices in December 2021 went well for the *Plague Tale* team, they had to return to working remotely once again in early 2022. Amidst a new wave of infections, not all of Asobo Studio's employees have made the move yet, and the free space in the office has been requisitioned for maintaining distance between work stations. This change in the organization of everyday work came at a fateful point: the game moved into the beta testing phase in February 2022. As the time remaining until the release is dedicated to final touches and details, avoiding inertia related to teleworking is a priority for the team. Luckily, the recording of the voices was not delayed by the pandemic. "It's always in the final months, when we have the music and the voices, that everything works and we're excited to get to that point," says Kévin Choteau.

A LEAP OF FAITH

I feel the need to conclude this first chapter, dedicated to the development of the games, with this idea of a leap of faith. Being able to speak with the Asobo team and see the game's evolution over the years profoundly changed my way of viewing the video game industry, and I hope that I've succeeded in giving you a faithful account of their work. I'm sure I could fill several books with the slightest details of all aspects of a game's production. However, my personal goal is to gradually reduce the gap between the general public and the people who develop the games we love so much. Although the industry appears to be going through a new stage in its evolution, delving into questions about things like representation and working conditions, it still has a long way to go. Moreover, I am delighted to be able to use this unique opportunity to take you behind the scenes while paying homage to the work of dozens of women and men who have brought the adventures of Amicia and Hugo to life.

In a twist of fate, I, too, find myself taking a leap of faith as I have no idea how *Requiem* will be received once it's re-

leased. I have high hopes that the efforts of the studio and publisher to gain exposure for *Innocence* will ultimately pay off and that people will recognize the true value of Asobo Studio. While every project is unique, I can easily imagine how the members of the team will feel when video game websites first start sharing their reviews, or how they'll feel as they fervently watch streamers from around the world discovering the ending to the adventures of the two children. After so many years spent imagining these characters, environments, and stories, it must be particularly difficult to say goodbye to them. Only time will tell if the Bordeaux-based studio will have the chance to bring to life other plague tales, since beyond the story of Amicia and Hugo, there's an entire universe that the team has imagined and which we will explore in the next chapter.



III

UNIVERSE

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN REALITY AND FANTASY

It may seem strange to talk about a "universe" for two games whose stories take place between 1348 and 1349, but to not do so would be to ignore the in-depth research conducted by the entire Asobo Studio team. In their quest to create a game that's "grounded," as Kévin Choteau put it, every aspect of the game was investigated, in some cases down to the smallest detail. The team settled on the Middle Ages, and particularly the time of the Hundred Years' War, after several weeks of reflection and study. Once this period was confirmed, each department dove into the history of the era. Once again, it's my pleasure to share with you a fraction of their findings. Several dozen documents were made available to me, and the diversity of that corpus is a testament to the research they conducted. In addition to hundreds of photographs, engravings, and paintings used by the artists as references for architecture, aesthetics, and clothing, they shared with me academic research on alchemy and its symbols, the period's cuisine, and the evolution of carts over the ages.

Although all these elements don't necessarily appear in the game, the research fed the imaginations of the team and, by extension, contributed to the series' universe. That universe takes inspiration from reality, without actually being a historical tableau. Still, the game contains very real elements—in particular, I'm thinking of the "Curiosities," collectible objects in *Innocence* that offer a window into the bygone era in which the game is set. That said, to paraphrase Sébastien Renard, the mere fact that Amicia wears pants is a flagrant anachronism for anyone wanting to depict the society of the 14th century. So, each of the aspects of the game was evaluated in light of the story told by Asobo so that it would appear realistic for players. We all have a certain vision of the Middle Ages, a blend of things we learned in school and from cultural references: movies, novels, comics, and even video games. Relying on a handful of markers that we all have in common, the studio laid the foundation for its universe in such a way that we would be transported to this fictional version of the Middle Ages. Once you get swept up in the story, the questions you may have about the veracity of certain elements of the game get pushed to the back burner: this process is known as the "suspension of disbelief."

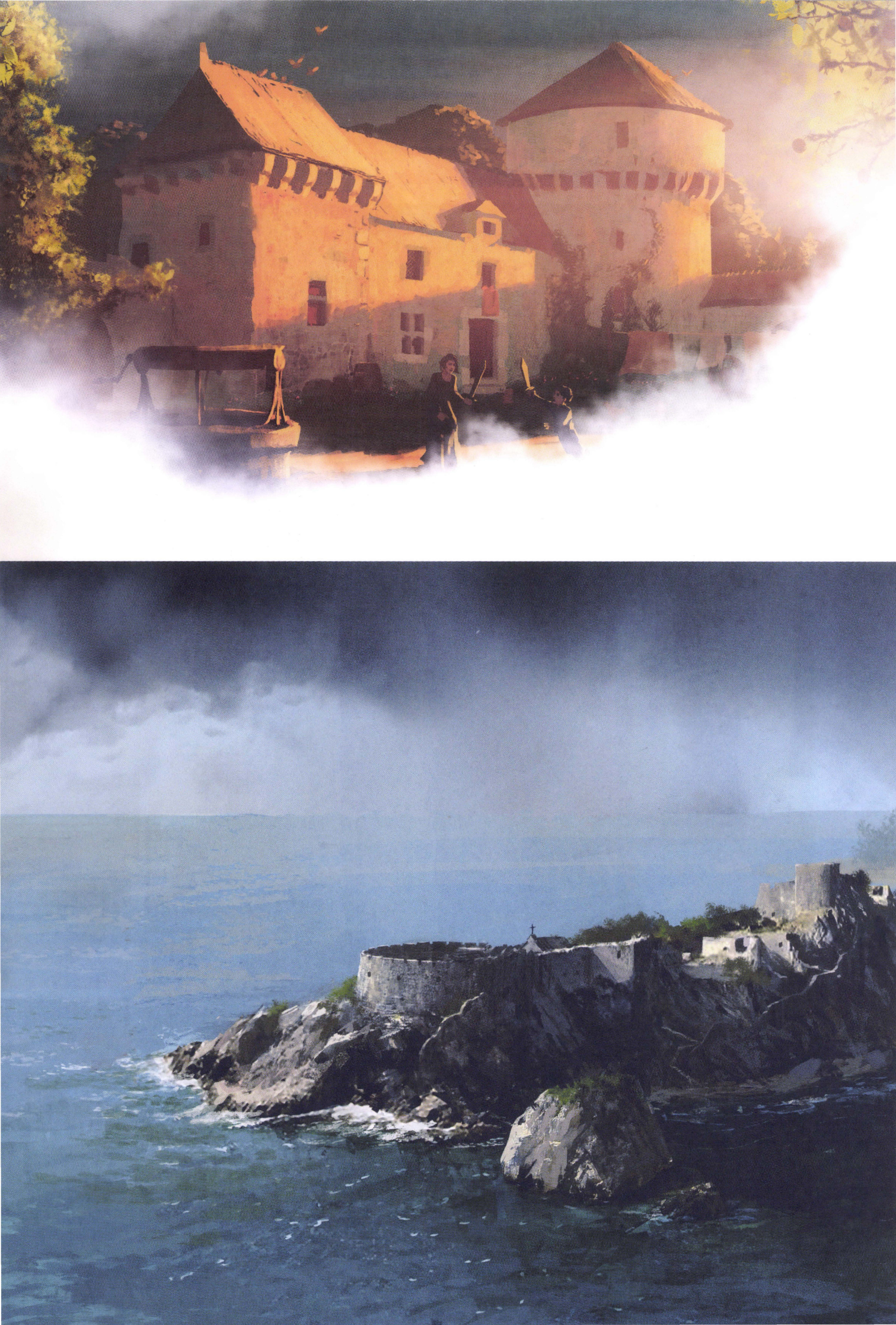
While the reality of the Asobo team's work is there, staring us right in the face, it's hard for us to fully comprehend that certain elements or locations that we visit in a matter of minutes sometimes required months of work. This imbalance may seem thankless at first glance, but actually, it's one of the special characteristics of the strange art of the video game: the developers aim to make themselves as invisible as possible so that we can fully enjoy the adventure that they've created. While this is not unique to video games, I sometimes compare the medium to the implicit pact made between a magician and their audience, with the spectators accepting the tricks as reality while they watch the show. However, there's a major difference between video games and other forms of artistic expression: we, the audience, are partly in control of the show; we are the ones who decide to move forward and to take action. In this chapter dedicated to the universe of the *Plague Tale* games, I will ask you to reprise the role of the ordinary spectator so that we can assess and analyze the work performed by the artists and storytellers of Asobo Studio.

Our overview begins with some of the elements that make up what we typically call the "lore" of the universe. The lore is everything that makes up the larger universe of a game, including the specific space and time explored by players, as well as all of the events leading up to that precise moment in time. By this, I mean to say that the story of Amicia and Hugo is not the starting point of the universe; rather, it's an important sequence that is the result of earlier events. The story of the games didn't appear spontaneously in the minds of the studio's team. However, the first episode, *Innocence*, only reveals a few elements of lore; it's largely in *Requiem* that we learn more about Hugo's illness. In any case, to facilitate our exploration of the game's universe, I think it will be more useful to present the lore chronologically, going back a few centuries to the very origins of Hugo's illness.

THE PRIMA MACULA

Very early in the first installment, we meet the De Rune family through the eyes of Amicia, the eldest daughter, who has never really been close with her little brother, Hugo. The two come together with the arrival of troops from the Inquisition: they are looking for the young boy, who is afflicted with an illness, which is not contagious, according to his mother, Lady Beatrice. Forced to flee, the two children are left to fend for themselves, their only instruction being to find the alchemist Laurentius, a friend of Lady Beatrice, who will be able to help them. It's not until chapter 4, when they meet the alchemist's apprentice, Lucas, that we hear the term Prima Macula for the first time. This term, sometimes shortened to Macula, comes from Latin and can be translated as "first stain." The most visible symptoms appear quite early in "Carriers," who, in childhood, present distinctive markings according to the development of the disease. While the characters have little information about it, they do know that the Macula is characterized by different stages, called "thresholds," which echo the intensifying link between the Carrier of the illness and the rats.

The urgency of the story told in *Innocence* pushes this information into the background until Amicia and Lucas are forced to return to the De Rune family's estate. To provide some relief to Hugo, they visit a secret lab used by Lady Beatrice. The lab was built at the time of the Plague of Justinian, a very real plague epidemic that was declared in the year 541 C.E. Once again, the information is put aside due to the arrival of the rats in the laboratory. *A Plague Tale: Innocence* mainly revolves around the story of the children and their relationship; just a few snippets of lore are scattered here and there. The ties to the Plague of Justinian or the book *Sanguinis Itinera* ("Voyages of the Blood") are not the main concerns of the player, who, like Amicia, aims first and foremost to survive and to protect Hugo.



The dynamic changes in *Requiem*: Hugo's condition seems to stabilize at the beginning of the adventure, in spite of his recurring dreams of an island and a phoenix that guides him to a spring that can cure him. In addition to concluding the story, the second installment explores in greater depth the origin of Hugo's illness, as well as the unique relationship between the disease's Carrier and his Protector. These two roles were identified centuries earlier: the duo of Amicia and Hugo is not the first in history. While the exact point in time when the first Carrier appeared remains uncertain, the information having been lost to time, the shadow of one of Hugo's ancestors, responsible for the Plague of Justinian, hangs over the Island of Cuna.

This island is home to the ruins of buildings used by the Order, an ancient society of alchemists who have been studying the disease for centuries. The only thing that they're absolutely convinced of is that the Macula is responsible for terrible epidemics threatening the very existence of humanity. In the year 400 B.C.E., Greek alchemists decided to warn rulers of the danger posed by the disease and they gradually obtained the funds needed to create the Order. In absolute secrecy, alchemists from different countries gathered testimony relating to past Carriers and kept themselves ready to take action when the Macula would again appear in the blood of a child. The centuries passed and around 400 C.E., the Order decided to establish a base on the Island of Cuna, in the Mediterranean Sea, where they could study and, above all, isolate future Carriers. However, the strategic position of the island made it an ideal hub for Mediterranean trade, and the separation from the Roman Empire only raised tensions over control of the island. This is why there are traces of Byzantine and Moorish architecture among the many buildings on the island. The Order apparently managed to carry on, operating independently of the successive political powers controlling the island, which was equipped to host a Carrier: Hugo's ancestor.

THE PLAGUE OF JUSTINIAN

This tragic chapter in our history is a perfect example of historical imitation: a real event integrated into the game's universe and blended with fictional elements. Starting in the year 541, for close to two centuries, this disease ravaged Europe in successive waves after an initial outbreak declared in Egypt. According to some, there were thousands of deaths a day in certain cities, such as Constantinople, and the death toll likely reached over 25 million over those two centuries. This plague was named after the Byzantine emperor Justinian, whose reign was marked by the beginning of the epidemic. At the time, maritime trade was in full swing and was most probably responsible for the rapid spread of the disease throughout the Mediterranean Basin. Among the information made available to me, I discovered that the link between rats, particularly their fleas, and the transmission of the Plague was not established until the 18th century. Before that, the Plague was the source of many superstitions, and the lack of scientific knowledge sometimes led people to facilitate the progression of the epidemic in spite of themselves. This information was purposely set aside in *A Plague Tale*, as the rats play a central role in the plot.

THE PLAGUE OF ASHDOD, ALSO KNOWN AS *THE MIRACLE OF THE ARK IN THE TEMPLE OF DAGON*
Nicolas poussin (1630-1631)

HUGO'S ANCESTOR

Back in the universe of the series, we go to Provence this time, where a boy named Basil was born in the year 534 and showed symptoms of the Macula from a very early age. It's worth noting that, while we call him an ancestor of Hugo, they're not actually from the same family. Their only connection is, in fact, the disease, whose transmission remains a mystery. In addition to the markings on his face, the regular attacks of his disease led his parents to abandon him in front of a church, where he was taken in by monks. His childhood was particularly tough: Basil was regularly beaten. One day, for some unknown reason, his cries became more intense and for a few moments, the floor of the abbey began to tremble. Terrified, the monks didn't take long to associate the two events and they decided to lock up the boy, who seemed to have demonic powers. Rumor spread throughout the region that an evil child had appeared. That rumor made its way to the alchemists of the Order, who immediately made plans to collect the boy. You can imagine the monks' relief when they learned they could rid themselves of this burden. They handed the child over to the alchemists, who then began their journey back to Island of Cuna, where the Carrier became the center of attention for the members of the Order.

Unlike the monks, the alchemists were aware of the Carrier's immense power: they treated him with the utmost respect, explaining to him his role and the cause of his illness. He even received his own squad of bodyguards. Among the soldiers assigned to protect him was a young mercenary named Aelia Dragas. In spite of her modest upbringing, Aelia's courage and talent in combat led to her induction into this elite unit, but getting to know the child triggered unexpected emotions in her. The two began forging a bond that grew stronger day by day. Aelia became Basil's protector, swearing to give her life for him, if need be. With this story, we learn that a Carrier and their Protector don't necessarily need to be tied together by blood, as in the case of Amicia and Hugo. The Protectors guarantee the emotional and physical well-being of the Carriers: that is how this dynamic forms. With Aelia by his side, Basil's everyday life improved and he even managed to get through the various thresholds of the Macula without difficulty. The alchemists of the Order thus understood the importance of the Protector; however, their objective remained the same: to prevent the Carrier from reaching the final threshold in order to avoid the epidemic.

The rapid evolution of the boy's powers worried the alchemists, who suspected that the Carrier was about to reach the final threshold and thus obtain limitless power over the rats. Their mission was to avoid at all costs reaching that ultimate stage, which was presented in all the texts available to them as the origin of epidemics capable of endangering all of humanity. In spite of centuries of research, no remedy had been found to prevent the evolution of the Carrier, who would then become a threat and had to be eliminated. Under pressure from certain members of the Order and their sponsors, Basil was torn away from Aelia's protection and imprisoned deep under the mountain on the Island of Cuna. The Protector, too, was locked up in another location on the island, where she recorded her story so that, one day, someone would discover that the Order, unable to cure the Carriers, ended up killing them. A few centuries later, Amicia and Hugo discover this testimony during their visit to Island of Cuna.

While Aelia only left a few words, she managed to explain that she was betrayed by the Order and that she had to get to the Carrier by any means necessary. What the Order failed to understand was that, by separating Basil and Aelia, they had accelerated the evolution of the Macula in the blood of the Carrier, who was pushed to the verge of death. The manifestations of his power left no room for doubt: an epidemic was about to break out if the Carrier remained alive. In addition to the earthquakes and the appearance of rats all over the island, a new event was added to the list of the Macula's effects: a black fog gradually filled the sky. Called the "Nebula" in the Order's texts, this fog was the undeniable sign of the disease's final threshold, and it was so dense that it could block out the rays of the sun, plunging the island into total darkness.

As light is the bane of the rats' existence, this cloud was the essential condition allowing the rodents to spread over massive areas. The Protector took advantage of the confusion to escape and fought a fierce battle against the Order's guards in order to reach Basil. Sadly, she died along the way, mere steps from her friend. The shock of this loss pushed the Carrier to the disease's final threshold; in other words, he was doomed. Basil died, unleashing the epidemic known as the Plague of Justinian.

THE CULT OF THE CHILD

Over time, the Order's presence on the island was gradually erased. The link between the Order's activities and the plague epidemic was never revealed and the Order's experiments conducted in secret gave rise to a local legend known as the "Cult of the Child." The legend tells of a boy who was born during a dark time. He was capable of emitting a light so powerful that it ultimately enraged the creatures of the night, who abducted the boy and held him captive deep in their lair. A young warrior woman set off to rescue him, but she didn't make it in time to save him. However, the bond between them gave the boy the strength to emit his light one last time, restoring fertility to the surrounding land. This interpretation of the former Carrier's life is interesting because it resembles many myths and legends related to the changing of the seasons and the cyclical passage of time.

VICTOR D'ARLES
COUNTE OF PROVENCE

In the universe of *A Plague Tale*, it turns out that a number of the inhabitants of the island are sterile, probably due to the influence of the rats and the Nebula that has accumulated over the centuries. Among the sterile are the Count and Countess of Provence, who want desperately to conceive a child. It even became an obsession for Count Victor of Arles, who appropriated the local myth by proclaiming himself the descendant of the young warrior woman in the legend. In his version, the chosen one can also emit a light and, through their sacrifice, the land will be returned to its natural state and the women will again be able to bear children. This new interpretation spread among the island's inhabitants, who, each year, take part in a ceremony as they await the return of the chosen one, whom they believe to be the only one capable of ending their suffering. This explains the very warm welcome that Hugo receives when he arrives on the island. The first such ceremony took place about 20 years before Hugo's birth and the events of *Innocence*.

PLAGUE TALES

There are many preconceived notions about the Middle Ages, which was not a dark or backwards period, as we often think. I, myself, was surprised by the extent of my ignorance about the era. That said, some events are so tragic that they're extremely difficult to depict on screen: here, I'm referring to the extensive persecution suffered by the Jewish communities of Europe during the first few years of the Black Plague epidemic of 1348. In many big cities of Europe, the local people rose up against Jewish communities, sometimes with the tacit approval of the authorities. In addition to rioting, pillaging, and arson, this wave of hatred grew and grew, and thousands of people were burned alive, drastically reducing the Jewish population in Europe. All of this is well documented and yet rarely talked about, and in this day and age, with our society often divided on matters related to history, it seems that it would be difficult to incorporate this tragedy into a video game without running the risk of totally eclipsing the end goal: to offer an adventure centered on two children who have to fend for themselves in the face of the epidemic.

By writing about this, I don't mean to stir yet another controversy, but the fact is that, over the last several years, the video game world has regularly seen sharp divides on matters related to the representation of minorities. For a studio, taking a position is never a trivial thing. In particular, I'm reminded of the declarations from the developers of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, who justified the fact that the game's characters were all white by saying that there was supposedly no immigration in the Middle Ages[1]. I use this example because plenty of research shows that the reality was quite different, and the fact that the studio maintained its position in spite of the evidence available to them raises questions about the creators' intentions.

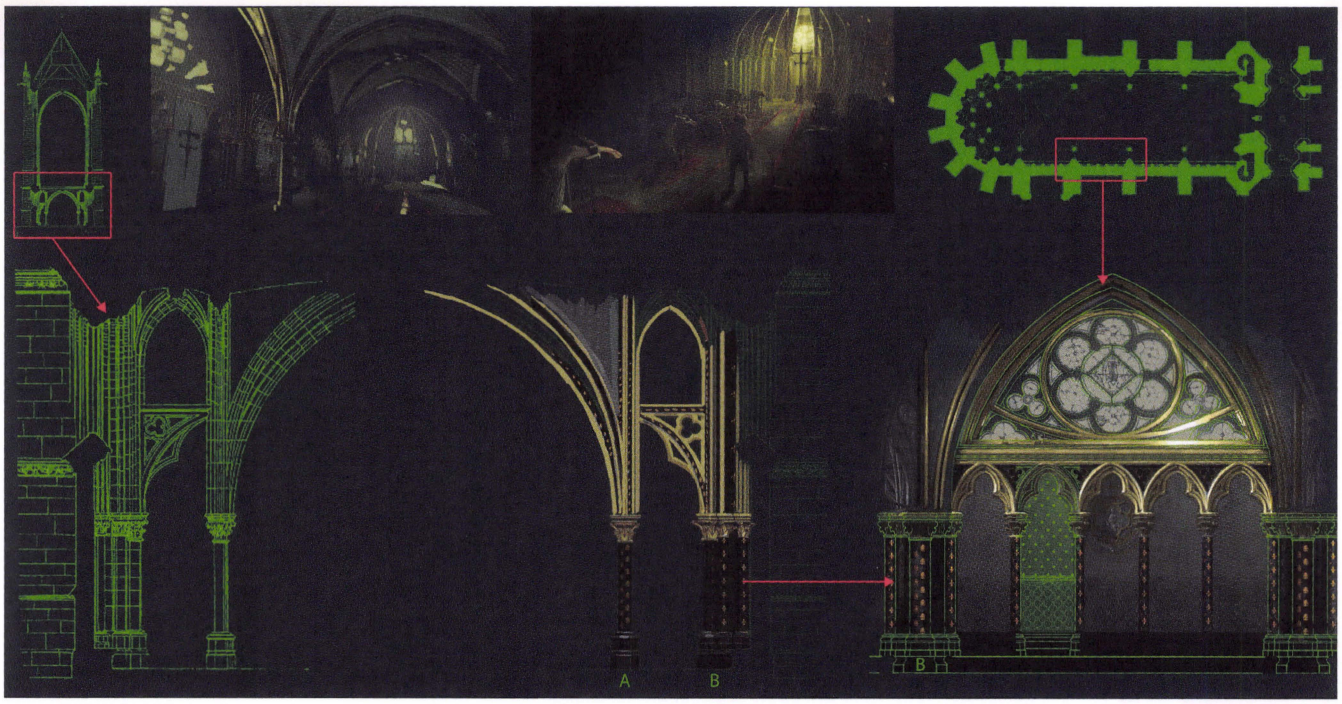
After this brief digression, let's get back to Bordeaux: the Asobo team had no interest in denying historical reality, but they also weren't necessarily looking to make it a central theme of their project. Among the examples of a fairly raw representation of the period, I'm reminded of a passage in chapter 2 of *Innocence*, aptly entitled "The Strangers." In the village square, what Hugo believes to be the "smell of grilled meat" is actually a stake for burning, on which we see a charred corpse, as well as a woman preparing for the same fate. Although we can sense a certain distancing from the historical reality, the studio didn't try to sweep under the rug the tragic events of the era. The villagers accuse "strangers" of being responsible for the disease and they soon begin chasing Amicia and Hugo, who have no other choice but to run for their lives.

1. Released February 13, 2019, this role-playing game is also set in the Middle Ages; however, the studio centered much of its marketing on the game's historical realism, making it an element susceptible to criticism or questioning.

RELIGION AND INQUISITION

In the universe of *A Plague Tale*, the subject of religion is another example of the delicate balance between fact and fiction, with religion being ever-present in the game, even though its key elements, like Christ or even God, aren't actually mentioned. This is a totally fascinating issue because, from a historical point of view, Catholicism played a central role at every level of society in the Middle Ages. Daily life was punctuated by church bells. Daily masses were markers of time. Catholic doctrine was taught to every stratum of the population and Latin was not yet a dead language. I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this: Catholicism is inextricably linked to any historical representation of medieval France. The separation of church and state in France was a long process that started with the French Revolution in 1789 and concluded with the 1905 law that separated the two entities once and for all.

As such, it's hard for a game that takes place in the 14th century to not explicitly mention Catholicism, but the team managed to strike a certain balance by showing the reality without actually making it a central theme of the story. Once again, this was a creative decision and the motive was ultimately quite simple: if an element does a disservice to the aim of the game, it doesn't need to be included. *A Plague Tale* isn't intended to be a historical re-enactment and it manages to allude to Catholicism without ever actually naming it. For example, when Amicia and Hugo find themselves at the monastery after fleeing the villagers in chapter 2 of *Innocence*, we don't see a single crucifix or stained-glass window; the one thing we do see is the rosary that you can pick up and that Amicia describes



to Hugo as an object used for prayer. Still, the rosary is just an optional item, a Curiosity: collectible objects that are mainly just there for fun, but which nonetheless are directly linked to history, with the game offering detailed descriptions. The player can interact with an altar in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary, but Amicia makes no mention of her name or of God. She simply asks for forgiveness for the sins she's just committed. Likewise, a few minutes later, during the conversation with Father Thomas, he's wearing the habit and tonsure typical of a monk, but he doesn't wear a crucifix. Given the role of the Church in *A Plague Tale*, and especially that of the Inquisition, which really did exist, the studio aimed for balance so as to not make religion the antagonist, but rather to single out Vitalis Bénévent, who takes matters into his own hands. Indeed, the Grand Inquisitor wants to inject the Macula into his own bloodstream, while modifying its effects, in order to control the rats and eliminate the plague epidemic.

I don't need to explain to you how religion is a sensitive subject in our day and age, and I find the studio's approach to be very interesting. The tightrope act you have to perform when dealing with religion is one of the pitfalls of trying to combine history and fantasy. That said, Asobo Studio knows that it has a global audience with different cultures and sensibilities. Indeed, you can't accuse them of blasphemy because Grand Inquisitor Vitalis is clearly repudiated by one of his peers during a conversation in chapter 14. While Hugo is looking for his mother, he witnesses a meeting between Vitalis and an archbishop, Monsignor Gauthier. The latter wears a crucifix and carries the crosier associated with his position in the Catholic Church. He mentions the Pope, then tells Vitalis that he's a "heretic" and that he's to be excommunicated. Grand Inquisitor Vitalis is thus sidelined by the Church, from which he has strayed. From this, we can see that the studio's goal is not to criticize religion, but rather to examine the relationships between the different characters.

Although the Inquisition isn't at the heart of the story of *Requiem*, Amicia and Hugo encounter religion at various points throughout their adventure. In particular, I'm thinking of their arrival at a camp of pilgrims heading to Rome to celebrate the jubilee year of 1350. This was a very

THE GRAND INQUISITOR VITALIS

real event and the duration of travel at the time makes it perfectly plausible that hundreds of people would have been heading to the Italian city to attend the festivities. It offers one of the rare moments in which religion is represented in *Requiem*: the protagonists attend the very end of a mass held in the ruins of a church. It's also interesting to note that Hugo repeats the word "amen" after hearing it, without understanding what it means. It's inconceivable that a child living in that era would never have attended mass, but this detail simply reminds us that he was kept in isolation from a very early age. Still, religion remains in the background, as the protagonists are pursued by Arnaud's soldiers, and they merely pass through the pilgrims' camp before entering the quarry that lends its name to chapter 6.

While it may be anchored in the Middle Ages, *A Plague Tale* is not a series about religion. For this reason, the developers haven't made it a central theme of the story. Its presence can be explained by the desire to offer a realistic universe; it also gives the story a perfect justification for Vitalis' authority in *Innocence*. Not just anybody would have access to such material and human resources, and as an institution, the Church offered the authors the perfect context to bring their antagonist to life. However, this choice comes with its fair share of contradictions and has forced the studio to constantly perform a balancing act so as not to allude too directly to Christianity.

DEPICTING ILLNESS AND DEATH

Among the choices made by the studio to reinforce the story's themes, the representation of illness and death, in particular, clashes with the rest of the video games. The Plague is not just a pretext to explain the presence of the rats, and we witness the terrible effects of the disease throughout the adventures of Amicia and Hugo. An example that really stood out for me in *Innocence* appears in chapter 9, entitled "In the Shadow of Ramparts." Incredibly, we find not hundreds, but thousands of bodies completely covering the ground. It's rare in a video game to find such a raw depiction of the reality of war, even though war is a very common theme for the medium; instead, the numerous shooting games tend to focus on the heroism of soldiers. Of course, there are a few examples to the contrary, like 2012's *Spec Ops: The Line* or 2014's *Valiant Hearts: The Great War*, but they're the exception to the rule. The Asobo team approached this scene from an unexpected angle: instead of minimizing the visual impact, for example, to circumvent the technical issues tied to displaying such a scene, they made it so that the thousands of bodies would fill the field of vision, to the point that it would look like a sea of corpses. In this image, you can even see a macabre allusion to a sequence that appears earlier in the adventure, when Hugo and Amicia make their way through hundreds of bodies of pigs. Death is ubiquitous in the universe of *A Plague Tale* and is presented in a different light compared to other video games. All of these creative choices are aimed at bringing to life on screen the studio's vision and reinforcing the idea of the epidemic spreading everywhere we look.

As Sébastien Renard mentions, nastiness is everywhere, especially when people collapse in the middle of the street. In chapter 9, we play as Amicia as she sneaks into a university to retrieve a book. This sequence, in addition to presenting Amicia alone for the first time since the start of the adventure, shows us the impact of the disease within a city and brings us face to face with human tragedies that I found to be particularly shocking. I'm reminded of one of the houses I visited, where I discovered a man hanging in the middle of the main room and had to use his body to distract the rats. This is not simply an element of gameplay. We can deduce the tragedy that has taken place in that room when, upstairs, we discover two bodies covered with a sheet. Only their feet are visible and we can imagine that they're probably children or a mother and her child, taken by the disease like thousands of others.

Later, Amicia has to cross an immense gallows where dozens of people have been hung. The studio could have just shown it to us from a distance, but instead, you have to crouch and walk through the corpses, most of them devoured by rats. This sort of depiction of death is surprising because it's generally found in horror games, where such imagery is intended to shock and frighten. In this case, it's a conscious choice to make the disease a very concrete element of the universe, and that's done through an unfiltered representation of its impact on the population. The same approach is found in *Requiem*, in which you pass through the butchers' district, which, again, evokes the idea of ever-present nastiness. Moreover, the Red City is presented as having two sides to it: on the one hand, a joyous side where people enjoy themselves, on the other hand, a terrifying side where bodies pile up in the arena where the sick are quarantined.

DEPICTING THE MIDDLE AGES

In one of the promotional videos released before *Innocence* came out, Sébastien Renard describes the time period of the game as "one of the worst periods in history." In addition to the Hundred Years' War, millions of lives were about to be lost in the span of just a few years, drastically reducing the population of Europe. Even though, as fate would have it, since 2020, we've been living through our own pandemic, it's hard to compare our everyday experiences to those of the 14th century. Managing to bring that period to life on screen was a major challenge for the artists of Asobo Studio. Their idea was not to instantly plunge us into the horrors of war and disease, but rather to take us there gradually. To do that, they used a slow evolution of the colors seen from chapter to chapter, from the happy, carefree days of the prologue to the final battle against Vitalis in the cathedral. This visual progression is tied to the perspective of Amicia and Hugo; we witness that same progression alongside them, reinforcing our immersion in the game's universe.

This method offers multiple advantages. On the one hand, it's a simple way to mark the passage of time over the course of the adventure and to show us the changing of the seasons, particularly with the gap between chapters 13 and 14. On the other hand, the chromatic changes reflect the atmospheres of the different locations and accompany the slow descent into hell experienced by the protagonists. Starting in the prologue, the transition from when Amicia pursues a wild boar to when she tries to catch her dog is striking: mud replaces the flowering fields and the forest canopy gradually blocks out the natural light. This contrast sets the stage for the rest of the adventure and allows the Asobo team to set the tone in a matter of minutes.

From there, the lighting of scenes continues to evolve over time: it's daytime when the two children arrive in the village and are chased by the angry inhabitants. Forced to seek refuge in a monastery, they plunge into the darkness and have their first encounter with the rats. They quickly realize that only light can keep the rodents at bay, and the end of chapter 3 is marked by their fleeing through a long tunnel that takes them to the surface. Their hope is short-lived, and as they approach the home of the alchemist Laurentius, night begins to fall. This chapter presents an interesting contrast because that specific time of day is what photographers often call the "golden hour." The natural light takes on a golden tint, and that's exactly the ambiance we see as we approach the mill next to Laurentius' home. As beautiful as the lighting is at that moment, it's also the sign that night is about to fall, thus heralding the arrival of the rats.

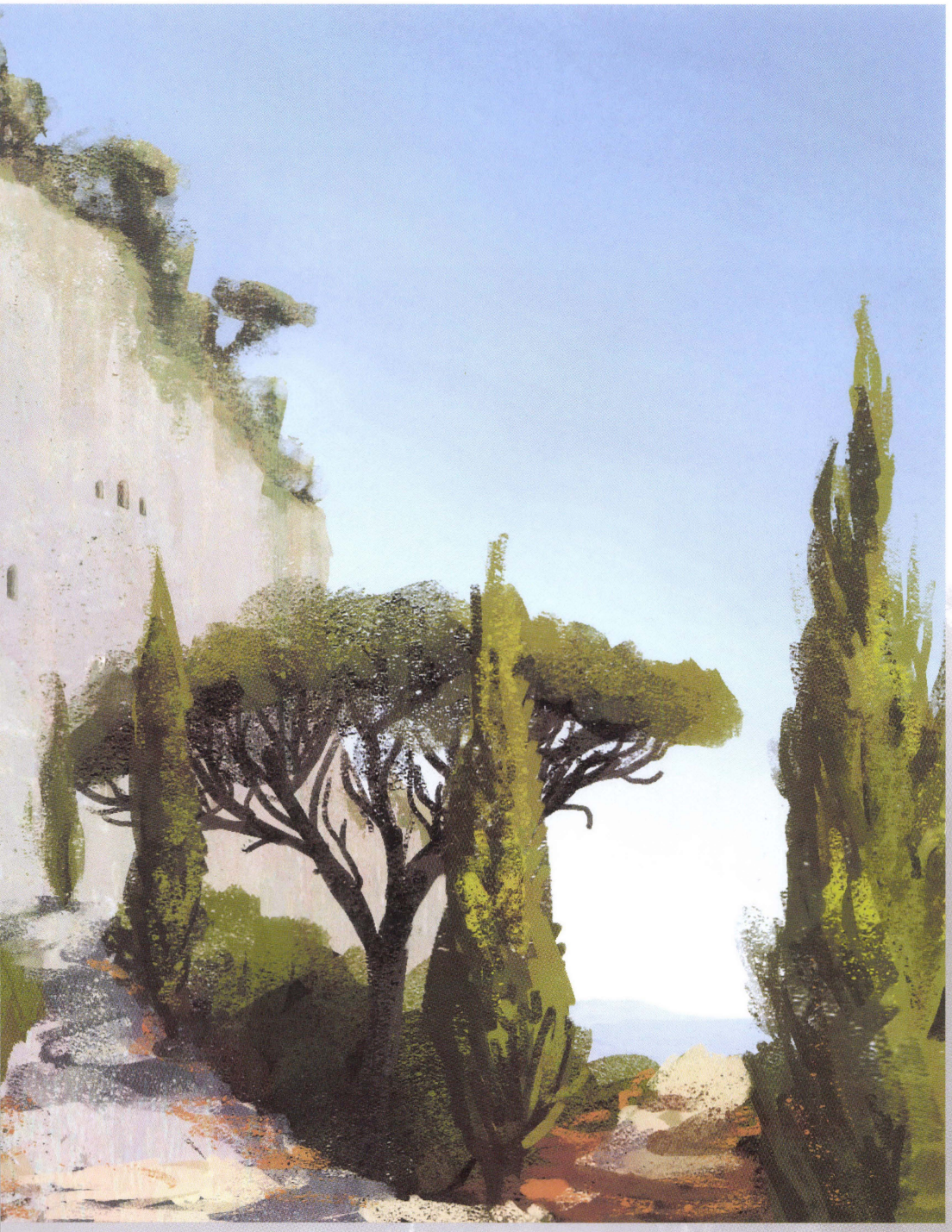
MORNING IN THE HARBOUR
Claude Gellée (1635-1645)

This contrasting of dark and light contributes both to purely aesthetic pleasure and to storytelling: it gives the Asobo game its identity. The studio's artists drew from numerous influences, particularly painters like Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) and Pieter Brueghel (1525-1569), in order to refine their work on lighting for the different scenes. This may seem obvious, but artificial lighting didn't exist at the time, with the exception of things like torches and lanterns. Additionally, one of the goals was to craft the atmosphere for each chapter while generally offering natural lighting—once again, they struck a balance between reality and fantasy. Olivier Ponsonnet has also mentioned the work of painter Claude Gellée (1600-1682), also known as "Le Lorrain," and particularly his way of giving the sky an orangish tint, evoking dawn and "a form of romanticism" that matches the ambiance Ponsonnet wished to project.

These inspirations from the works of master artists aren't limited to classical paintings. The children's descent into hell becomes total at the very end. Chapter 16, entitled "Coronation," intentionally moves away from a certain realism by totally embracing the idea of the omnipresent sickness, embodied on screen by a color palette that bounces between shades of yellow, green, and brown. The gradual disappearance of the warm colors from the early chapters in favor of this new palette is striking and marks the final stage in the journey of Amicia and Hugo. The chapter reaches its climax with the arrival in front of the immense cathedral where Vitalis is hiding out, loosely inspired by a painting by Zdzisław Beksiński (1929-2005), a Polish artist known for his surrealist and fantastic universe.

In addition to these references, the studio had an unusual bit of luck because many buildings from the era remain standing in the city of Bordeaux, some of them just steps from Asobo's offices. The history of the region is not a central theme of the game, but nonetheless, we can imagine that some of the areas visited in the game evoke places that are familiar for the developers. In a making-of video, David Dedeine explains that they were lucky to be able to study buildings and access a unique source of inspiration. However, the team didn't simply try to reproduce the exact appearance of the Middle Ages, and as Olivier Ponsonnet explains, they didn't want to just show half-timbered houses to create an illusion. The architecture and the layout of the houses, the narrow streets, and the ever-present filth are aspects meticulously presented in order to both create a feeling for the era and to communicate to us the team's vision of the period.

All of the experience that the team accumulated with the first game can be found in *Requiem*, for which the art direction didn't change. We find the same goal of illuminating each scene with natural lighting, while focusing on one or two dominant colors in each chapter. What changes in the sequel is the environment explored: from the very first minutes of the game, we can see that the landscapes have radically changed. While the action of *Innocence* often takes place at night, *Requiem* offers many daytime sequences in which we get to enjoy the sunshine of Provence. The plant life adds touches of saturated colors, and the arrival in the Red City was designed to stick in players' minds from the start of the adventure. As I've observed the evolution of the first few chapters over the years, I can say that the studio very clearly raised its visual ambitions and wants people to notice that fact.



For the protagonists, the journey is also the opportunity to discover new horizons, and both Amicia and Hugo regularly express their desire to settle in the region. Even though the Asobo team doesn't have a satellite office in Provence, we can again see the research that they conducted to present a perfectly credible vision of the region. The Red City, for example, evokes the many cities that are home to Roman ruins—places like Arles, of course, with its age-old amphitheater. The vegetation is perhaps the element that most easily transports us to the southeast of France. In addition to the lavender and the chirping of cicadas, the presence of cypress and olive trees by the sides of the roads is a very strong marker. Although certain chapters of the game return to the somber colors of the first installment, *Requiem* distinguishes itself with the diversity of its landscapes, which change throughout the adventure. The arrival on the Island of Cuna, in particular, is a high point in the story.

To bolster the realness of its story and of its depictions, the studio consulted with Roxane Chilà, a historian and researcher, to learn from her knowledge of the Middle Ages. In addition to providing the team with invaluable information about people's daily lives and their styles of dress, she also gave them key ideas for striking a balance between the modern needs for representation and the historical reality: things that we may find revolting today may have simply been the reality at the time. The historian's feedback notably focused on these distinctions in order to offer the studio different options for how to represent the historical period.

As such, when Asobo Studio chose to set *Requiem* in the Mediterranean basin, it moved away from its home region and had to figure out how to bring to life the society of the period. What were the relations like between the various countries? What was the situation with slaves? With pirates? What about styles of dress specific to the region? All of these questions entered into the initial research and in no way interfered with the creativity of the developers. On the contrary, in conversations with the historian, I learned that she provided them with crucial advice about directorial choices, as well as specific approaches for characters and themes. For example, there was the addition of dyeing vats in a chapter that was initially marked by a single dominant color. In addition to bringing vibrant colors into the sequence, the vats are perfectly realistic from a historical perspective: they were places where people would mix various ingredients in order to create dyes, particularly for clothing. In fact, clothing was an important topic of discussion. On several occasions, I read feedback concerning the team's color choices—certain colors, like red, were particularly rare at the time because of the difficulty of making them last in the long term. Another notable element was the absence of fur in the outfits originally imagined by Asobo's artists. According to the historian, this was very inconsistent with reality, and thus the team gradually added fur to the outfits of many characters.

THE ROLE OF SOUND...

The video game industry has always focused on the visual aspects of games: the display abilities of consoles are constantly at the heart of the manufacturers' marketing. However, sound is actually at least as important as graphics and plays a significant role in the overall experience of a video game, especially for a story-driven game in which most of the plot is delivered through dialogue. The audio aspects of a game, just like the visuals and the gameplay, provide us with precise information about the status of our character, their environment, and the results of our actions. It seems so obvious that throwing a pot will result in a sound when it shatters, to the point that we don't necessarily realize the importance of these sound effects. This self-evident fact alone proves the importance of sound, which plays a big role in immersion. For this reason, the team led by Aurélien Piters carefully crafted all of the audio aspects of the series, giving the games a true sonic identity.

You can do your own little experiment: close your eyes and think of the rats in *A Plague Tale*. I'll bet that the first thing that came to mind was their incessant squeaking or the cello music signaling their arrival. There are also notable elements related to their appearance, like the light coming from their eyes or the way in which the hordes move, but for me, the sound is what stands out in my mind. To paraphrase Asobo's audio director, players never notice the subtleties of the sounds, but they always notice their absence. This is yet another strange aspect of video games: many elements only work as intended if you don't pay close attention to them. That's essentially the message sent by Aurélien Piters in talks that he's given about the sound direction for *Innocence*, such as his talk at Game Camp[2] in Lille, France, in 2019, or his talk at the Game Developers Conference in 2020.

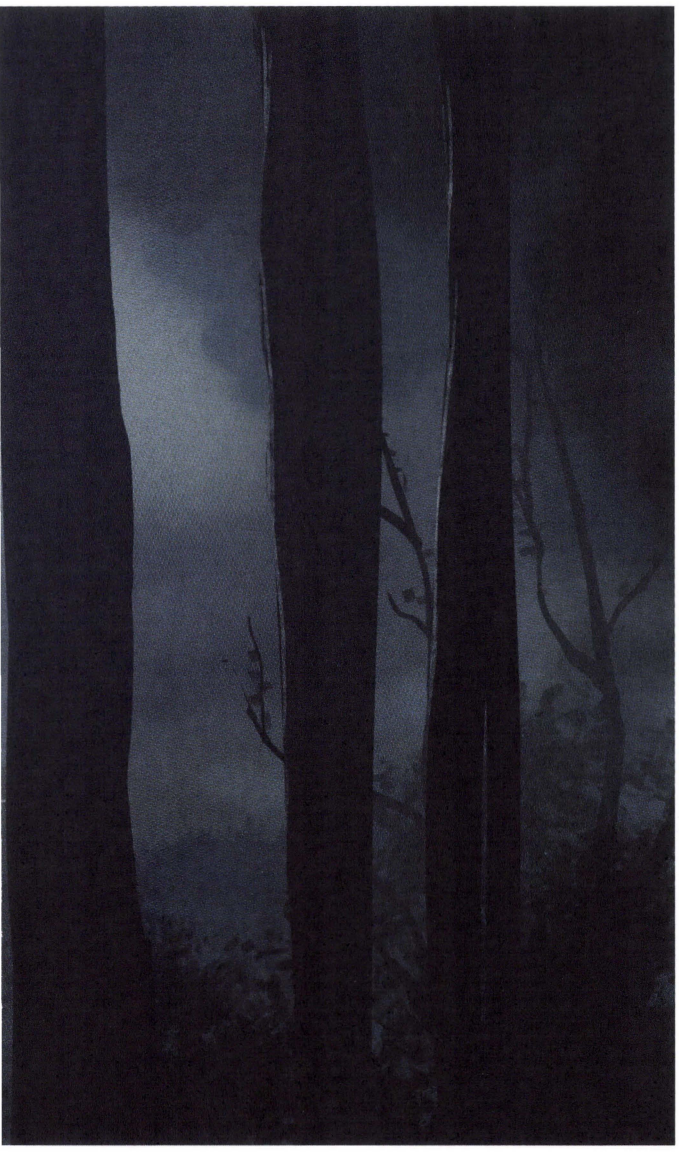
2. Game Camp is an annual conference that brings together video game professionals for several days. It's modeled off of the Game Developers Conference (GDC), held in the United States.

As with the game's art direction, one of the first objectives was to establish the sound direction and answer numerous questions. The adventure takes place in the Middle Ages and the sounds had to be capable of transporting us to that era. However, there are many different ways to design the sound for a scene. Outdoor sounds, for example, travel in a certain way and give us indications about the place we're passing through. The reverberation of sound is particularly strong in a cave or a church, just to give some simple examples. In terms of influences, notably, the audio team drew inspiration from the work done on the series *Game of Thrones* with the many sound effects from armor and from everyday life. For the general atmosphere of the sound, Aurélien Piters says that the films *Macbeth* (Justin Kurzel, 2015) and *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015) were sources of inspiration. In fact, the audio team received the same instruction as everyone else: strike a balance by offering a realistic representation of the era, while leaving room for the fictitious elements of the adventure.

At any given moment, you can hear the sounds of footsteps, of Amicia's clothing, of a torch she's carrying, of her breathing, and, of course, of her environment, not to mention the music. Into that mix, we sometimes add the noises of guards, of rats, or of objects with which we interact. As such, there are dozens of sounds that are constantly playing and which can be modulated dynamically according to the situation in the game. Among the examples Piters has given in speeches, the specific case of Amicia's breathing: it accelerates and gets louder according to how fast she's running. This element and all the others are mainly managed by the team's in-house engine, as well as the software Wwise, which is used to integrate and modulate sounds in a game. Thus, the audio work requires technical skills and often looks like programming.

The soundscapes prove to be much more dynamic than their visual equivalents. The trees may move, but it's hard to really bring a scene to life with images alone. Or, to be more precise, to do so would be so costly that no game developer can seriously envision having such extreme ambitions on that specific point. That's where the sound comes in to support the graphics by adding a touch of the unpredictable, whether it's the sound of the wind in the trees, the singing of birds, or the footsteps of a wild creature fleeing. You have to remember that the developers don't control the amount of time a player spends in each scene. We're sometimes guided by the urgency of a situation, but we can also occasionally take our time. In any case, the sound must not seem artificial, and to achieve this, the audio team programs the way in which the sound effects arrive so as to avoid having a loop if someone decides to spend 10 minutes in the same place.

Conversely, moments of action are the opportunity to deliver loads of information every second: the alertness of a guard, your proximity to rats or a danger, whether you hit an enemy with a shot from your sling, the list goes on. All of this feedback is essential, but it must not overshadow the story. Rather, the feedback must support the storytelling. For this reason, numerous sound transitions were recorded, for example, in order to mark the beginning of a guard alert sequence or rats jumping on a ham you cut down from the ceiling. Without our realizing it, the game teaches us to interpret these sounds and understand what they mean, a process of which we're most often only half aware. To give another example, if you listen closely, you can very easily figure out how far Amicia is from a guard and whether or not you're in danger of being detected. Then, the sounds change if he sees you and starts moving toward you. Once that alert returns to a minimal level, the soundscape becomes calmer again, Amicia's breathing slows, etc.



As such, sound is both a tool for immersion and for information, and it can even serve the purposes of gameplay, as seen in a short sequence in chapter 7 of *Innocence*, in which the storm indicates to us when we should continue. The light from the lightning repels the rats and very specific sounds are emitted to help us know when we should start running—then we never hear those sounds again in the rest of the adventure. It's worth noting that this was a decision the studio made: once we've associated a sound effect with an action or a specific situation, it would be strange to hear it again in a totally different context. It's quite difficult to pay tribute to the work of the audio team in a book made up of written words and images, but in any case, I hope that this section piqued your curiosity, and I encourage you to watch the talks given by Aurélien Piters.

OLIVIER DERIVIERE, COMPOSER.

...AND OF MUSIC

Like any other aspect of the production, the music contributes to the overall success of the *Plague Tale* series. The name behind the original soundtrack is Olivier Derivière, who has previously worked on over 20 games in his career. Derivière is particularly interested in the concept of interactive music. In speaking with him and the rest of the Asobo team, I could tell that he takes his role very seriously. Indeed, he gets actively involved in the phase where the music is integrated into the game, a complicated technical phase given that the tracks are not lined up one after another. Just like how Amicia's breath is modulated according to her distance from a guard, the music adapts to the player's actions and accompanies the story down to the smallest details. Composing music for video games has always required a certain level of technical skill and mastery of tools. In the case of Olivier Derivière, he wanted to get involved in making the game and be a true part of the team. This last point came up in every conversation that I had with the team about the music: in addition to maintaining regular contact with the Bordeaux-based studio, the composer tracked the production, played the game, and was always happy to discuss the developers' choices. This level of investment can be explained by Derivière's experience and his affection for the Asobo team—in fact, the composer has been friends with certain team members since childhood.

Still, it took a few months and numerous discussions for the developers and the composer to get on the same page about the music. At the beginning of the development of *Innocence*, David Dedeine, the game's creative director, had a specific idea in mind. To reflect the harshness and brutality of the game's universe, he wanted the sound of cellos to be at the heart of the soundtrack. With that in mind, Olivier Derivière developed *A Plague Tale*'s characteristic musical textures in collaboration with the cellist Eric-Maria Couturier from the Paris-based Ensemble Intercontemporain—particularly the sounds associated with the appearance of the hordes of rats. The composer, who also wanted to add a personal melodic touch to the adventure, worked in parallel on writing the various motifs and themes. There were many iterations before he and David Dedeine reached an agreement on the construction of the melodies. As such, the music direction of *A Plague Tale* was the result of this close collaboration, and it received glowing reviews when it was used in a presentation of the game given to media.

Among the topics discussed in my conversations with the composer, the matter of the evolution of video games came up many times. "We can try different things with video game music today," Olivier Derivière tells me. He believes that storytelling is expressed through gameplay and, thus, the music must also adapt to the player's actions. We don't necessarily realize this while playing *A Plague Tale*: the instruments enter and exit on the fly, and the tempo may suddenly accelerate. It all seems natural, but it's actually the consequence of our choices. In particular, during infiltration phases, the closer the player gets to enemies, the more troubling and overwhelming the music becomes—an aspect developed by Olivier Derivière based on an idea from David Dedeine, who wanted to accentuate the menacing side of the adults, with the game putting us in the shoes of Amicia and Hugo. While one might think that this "adaptive" music is not ideal for a linear game like *Innocence*, in fact, the soundtrack evolves in real time and tells us things, just like the dialogue and gameplay. "A game is a whole. Each element taken separately may work, but it's when you put them all together that magic happens," explains the composer, who believes that it's pointless to rank the facets of a game.

In addition to the interactive aspect, the music in *A Plague Tale* was used as an opportunity to highlight little-known medieval instruments, notably the viola da gamba and the nyckelharpa, both dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries. The nyckelharpa is an instrument with a very surprising form: it has both a keyboard and strings that are played with a bow. All the instruments are played by real musicians—I mention this to underscore the fact that there are many virtual instruments (the term used is "VST"[3]) frequently used in video game soundtracks. The thing is that the nuance provided by the talent of real musicians is important, especially given that the characteristic sound of these instruments from another era is hard to imitate. I encourage you to listen to them yourself. Their sound instantly evokes the atmosphere of *Innocence*: another way of striking the balance between authenticity and fantasy.

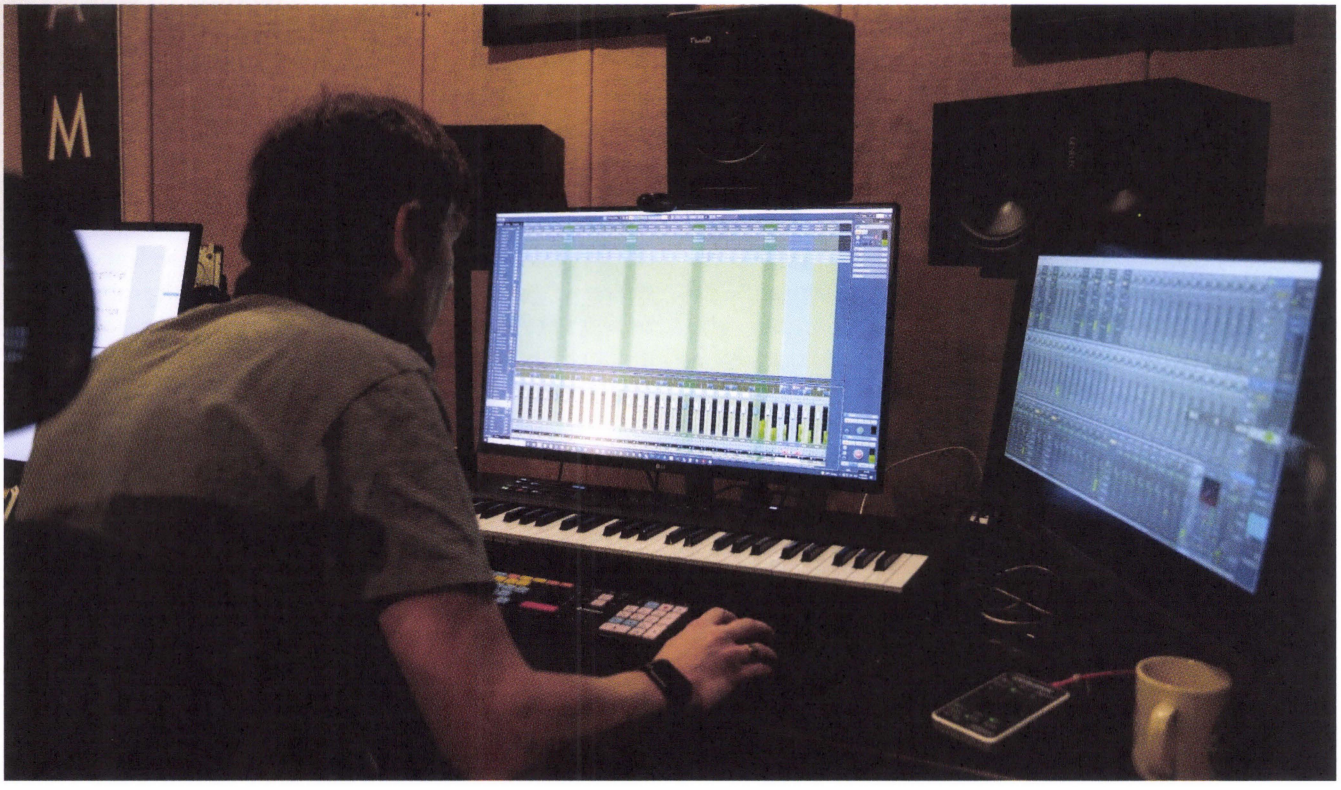
3. For "virtual studio technology." By extension, this term is used for recordings of instruments or even voices that are compatible with the many types of music software.

For the second installment, logically, Asobo Studio wanted to work again with Olivier Derivière, who was delighted to return to their atmosphere of "absolute mutual understanding." He showers the Bordeaux-based developers with praise, describing them as "way ahead of the game [because] they've understood that video games can offer something different," and, particularly, noting that "they don't even know how talented they are." In early 2021, the composer got back to work and spent close to a year writing many tracks for the sequel, which he played regularly to understand the developers' vision.

Since it's a sequel, "everything has to be better," and because of that, his music ups the intensity to match the rhythm and story of *Requiem*. The entire first part of the game on the mainland is the opportunity to explore Amicia's violent side, her frustration over not being by Hugo's side. As a result, if you listen carefully, you'll notice that certain motifs are only played for the first time when Amicia hugs her brother as they flee the Red City by boat. The music, like any storytelling tool, tells us something and contributes to the overall experience.

With the addition of adult companions in the sequel, the composer wanted to associate other sounds with them. For Arnaud, for example, Derivière assigned to him a medieval bagpipe. It's an unusual instrument, produced and played by Gabriel Desbiolles for Asobo Studio. To evoke Provence, the team met with players of the "*galoubet-tambourin*," a combination of a flute and a small drum typical of the region. However, Olivier Derivière's greatest pride has to be the fact that he got to work with the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, the same choir used by the Estonian art music composer Arvo Pärt: "I've liked his music since I was a little boy, and it's a dream to be able to work with such a prestigious choir." You might imagine that the musicians would be somewhat hesitant about working on a video game—prejudices are hard to break—and in fact, the composer told me that initially, the choir's manager wasn't very keen on such a project. In the end, though, after listening to Derivière's music, specifically the pieces composed for *Innocence*, they happily agreed to the proposal.

The addition of the choir is front and center in *Requiem* because it's associated with Island of Cuna. Indeed, when Amicia and Hugo arrive on the island, the instruments take a back seat in favor of the voices. For Derivière, the idea was to give the island a very strong identity, to make it a distinct place that's evolved almost entirely on its own compared to the rest of the Christian world. In doing so, he wanted to give the place a pagan personality in order to evoke the cult entirely made up in the mind of the Count of Provence. Moreover, the choir is at times an element of the game's lore, particularly when Amicia and Hugo follow the procession upon their arrival on the island. The music helps us immerse ourselves in these places that are both inspired by real life and completely made up. To quote game designer Jesse Schell: "Hearing is believing." Having had the opportunity to experience the game both with and without music, I can confirm the way that its incorporation impacts the adventure. The addition of the choir is a radical choice that marks a clean break with the music of *Innocence* while perfectly supporting the intensity of the story told by *Requiem*.



IV

DECRYPTION

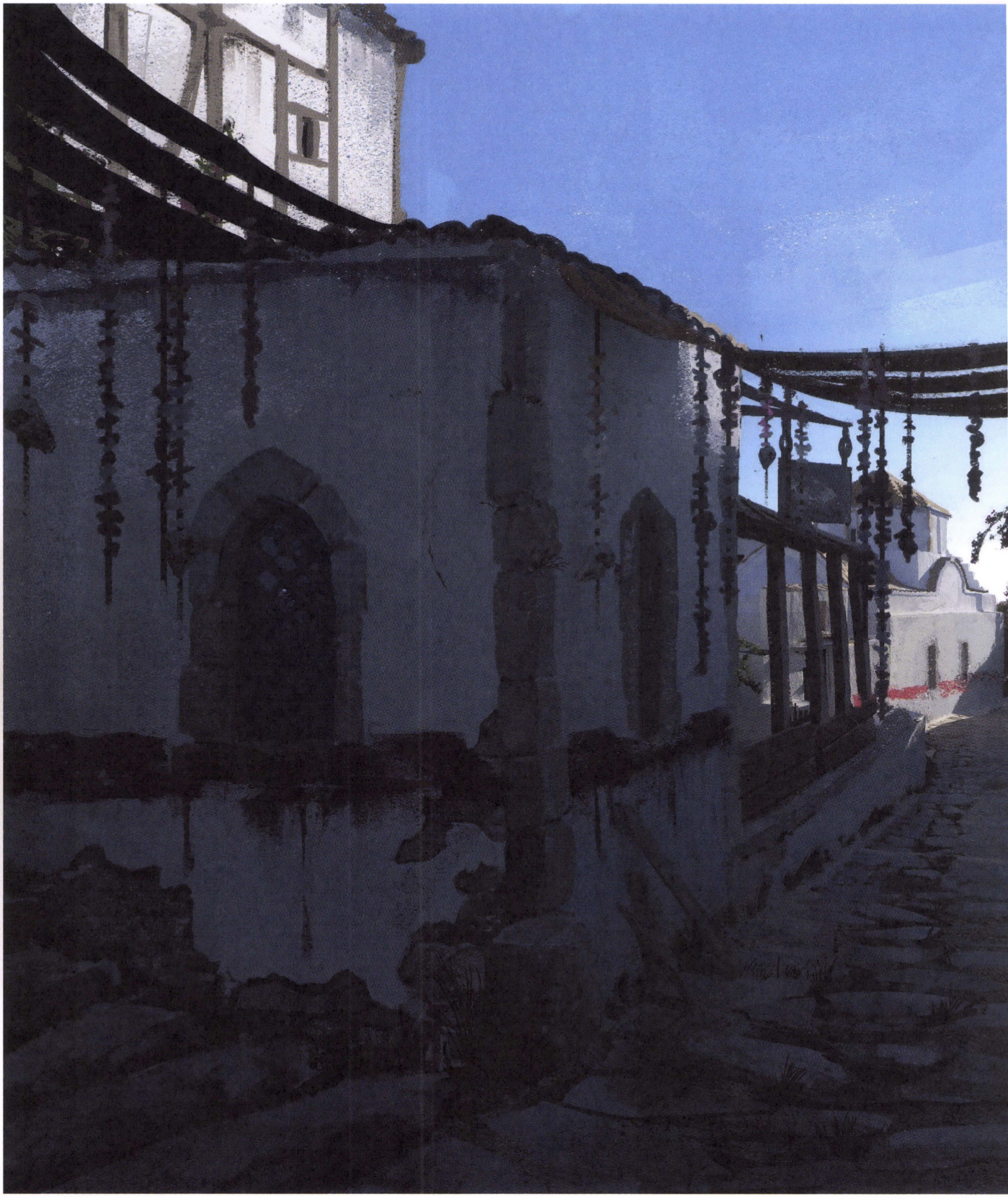
For this third and final chapter, I started with Asobo Studio's desire to create "a game capable of stirring emotions" in order to analyze the storytelling and gaming tools used to achieve that aim. In addition to having proved to the entire video-game industry that it's possible—and profitable—to offer a big-budget story-driven game, *The Last of Us*, over the course of its adventure, managed to make its gameplay and storytelling work in tandem. Over the last several years, many games have explored this approach and have shown that video games continue to evolve. In my opinion, it's even the proof of a new era for the medium, marked particularly by the abandonment of an opposition between storytelling and gameplay, an old debate passed down from traditional role-playing games. Storytelling is not just for cutscenes and dialogue, sequences in which we ultimately remain passive; indeed, the strength of video games is that they include us in the action. So, over time, creators have adopted a third way, in which all aspects of a video game are viewed as potential storytelling tools, including gameplay.

There are numerous examples. In particular, I'm reminded of the game *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, released in 2013, in which the player controls two brothers using a controller's two joysticks, thus making the brothers work together. More recently, *Celeste* distinguished itself by tackling the subjects of depression and self-confidence through a game with gameplay inspired directly by *Super Mario Bros*. As for the series *The Last of Us*, in particular, it makes us question our actions as players and the consequences that they have on the protagonist. Without getting into too much detail, the second game in the series puts the player in a situation where they have to deal heavy blows to another character by repeatedly hitting the same button. There's no other option: the action is set; the story will only continue if the player agrees to deliver the series of blows. The twist is that the entire sequence is seen through the eyes of the victim: the player is thus directly confronted with the face—and rage—of the protagonist who they've embodied. This reflection on violence and its consequences is probably one of the most pronounced influences in the series developed by Asobo.

STORYBOARDING

As the game is driven by its story, it's interesting to note that one of the first stages in development is storyboarding like one would do for a film. For each sequence, the creators clearly identify the time of day, the characters present, a dominant color, and a storytelling objective. This is a crucial stage in development because, in addition to helping the developers visualize the final game, it's a method that allows them to fine-tune the rhythm of the adventure very early on. Game development relies heavily on producing different iterations, and being able to test ideas fast thanks to this storyboarding offers the team a real advantage. For example, the team can identify and highlight the most intense moments in the story, as well as the downtime, creating what's called an intensity curve. There are good reasons why we often use the image of a roller coaster to describe the rhythm of a story, no matter the medium.

Sparking emotions requires that you anticipate players' reactions, identify the poignant moments, and ensure that the rest of the game doesn't conflict with the intentions of those sequences. This early storyboarding work helps the team throughout the entire production process. Ultimately, it's an ideal tool for communicating between all the studio's members. Each department gets a general idea of the work to be accomplished, the intentions of the writers, and how the protagonists evolve throughout the story.

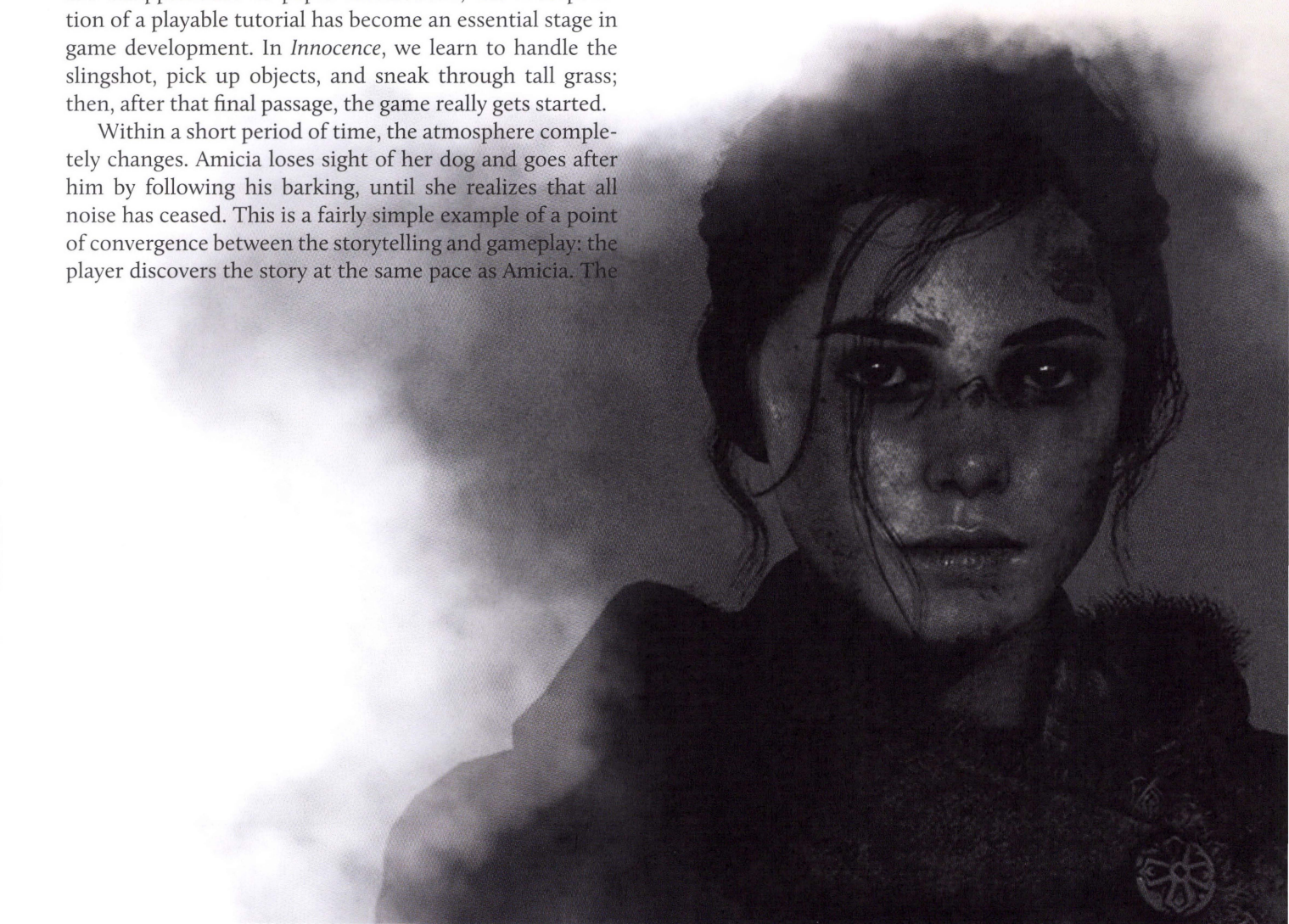


A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE

THE DE RUNE LEGACY

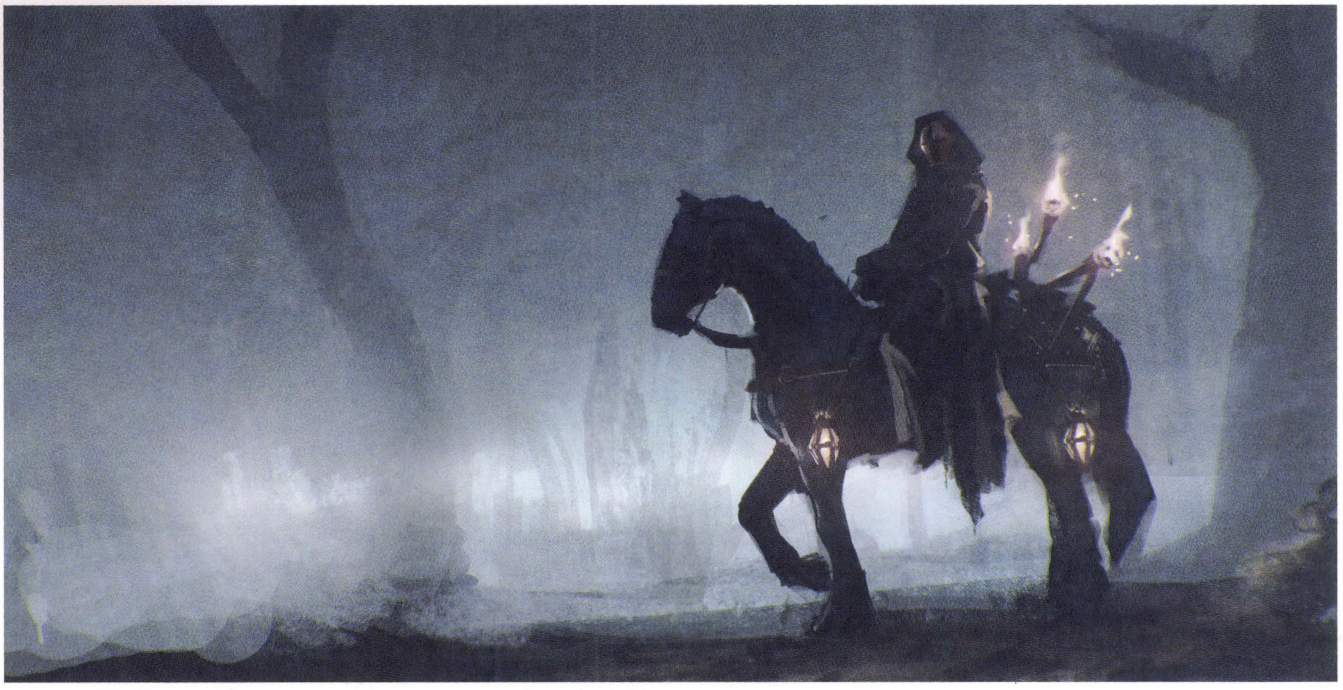
Among all of the sequences in a game, the very beginning of an adventure is probably the most important stage, both for learning the controls and for establishing the universe and the characters. It's not unusual for a studio to create the prologue for their game in the middle or at the end of production so that they can put all of their expertise and experience into it. The opening of *Innocence* manages to establish the ambiance in just a few minutes, and I'd like to take a moment to pay a special tribute to Lion, the De Rune family's dog, who plays a central role in the first chapter. Purposely light and taking place in radiant sunshine, the prologue shows us the carefree existence of Amicia and her father, Robert de Rune, who appear to be very happy in life. We thus learn that they live a life of privilege, while we also learn the controls and the game's basic actions. With the disappearance of paper instructions, the incorporation of a playable tutorial has become an essential stage in game development. In *Innocence*, we learn to handle the slingshot, pick up objects, and sneak through tall grass; then, after that final passage, the game really gets started.

Within a short period of time, the atmosphere completely changes. Amicia loses sight of her dog and goes after him by following his barking, until she realizes that all noise has ceased. This is a fairly simple example of a point of convergence between the storytelling and gameplay: the player discovers the story at the same pace as Amicia. The game gives us free rein to draw our own conclusions about Lion's fate. The progression is even altered, as we are forced to cross a muddy pond that slows down the protagonist's movements—an adept way of drawing out the suspense. Those few moments of uncertainty create a heavy atmosphere, and we're left expecting the worst, which is undoubtedly what the Asobo team intended. This sequence also helps players build an emotional bond with Amicia, even though at that point they've only been with her for a few minutes. Our attachment to her makes us sincerely worry about her dog. Having watched many streamers play the game for the first time, I can confirm that many people are blindsided by the outcome of the situation. The result is an effective sequence that quickly shatters the pleasant impression of the game's first few minutes.



As if killing off Lion wasn't enough, the developers chose to make us feel his agony with a close-up shot, though without showing the rats. This way of depicting horror is part of the identity of the studio, which makes no secret of its affinity for the genre. Imagine for a moment a completely different presentation of the scene: Amicia could simply have discovered her dog's collar or Lion's agony could have relied on off-camera effects instead of showing his suffering up close. The Asobo team prefers to show things rather than mask them. It's quite cruel to impose on Amicia this brief view of her dog suffering before he's swallowed by a dark pit. The music also plays a crucial role in the prologue. We get a very brief preview of the sounds associated with the rats, and we thus learn to associate danger with that music. I won't do a deep analysis of every sequence of the game, but I feel that the prologue perfectly serves its purpose, which is to introduce players to the game's universe and controls, and to stir players' emotions. Every indication is given to make us believe that we're viewing an ordinary afternoon in the life of the De Rune family, when we're actually experiencing a tipping point in the adventure. It's also worth noting that for a time this first chapter was entitled "The Loss of Innocence," but the team ultimately found that to be too explicit—better to not spoil the surprise!

From there, the first chapter continues to alternate between tutorial phases for the controls and exposition of the situation. After the shock of Lion's death, Amicia heads off to warn her mother and exchanges a few words with the residents of the family's estate. The Plague and the war are both brought up, but as the player doesn't really take part in the conversations, it's fairly easy to miss these mentions and focus on the assigned objective, which is to find Lady Beatrice. This downtime on the estate allows us to digest what we've already seen, while also illustrating the social



LADY BEATRICE

status of Amicia and her family. All of the villagers stop what they're doing to say hello to the girl and show her their due respect for her position. The game never really stops establishing its universe, and these instances reinforce our bond with Amicia bit by bit.

We also come to understand that Amicia probably hasn't spent a lot of time with her mother, who remains preoccupied with the disease of Amicia's younger brother, who has been isolated for his entire childhood. Hugo's illness is nothing new and has weighed on Amicia's upbringing. We can tell that she feels lonely and longs for the company of her loved ones. The rest of the chapter marks a definitive break in Amicia's carefree life: just moments after finally meeting her little brother, Amicia witnesses her father being killed by soldiers of the Inquisition. The game gives us no time to collect ourselves. We immediately have to tend to Hugo and carefully sneak out of the house. Joined by Lady Beatrice, the player and characters get one final lesson on stealth as they dodge the guards who've locked down the estate.

With this new knowledge, the two children are left to fend for themselves and believe that their mother has been killed—and the same is true for the player, in theory deceived by the directorial choices, with a skillful use of off-camera effects. Amicia has no other choice but to protect her little brother. Her only indication of where to go next concerns the alchemist Laurentius, the only person capable of helping Hugo, according to Lady Beatrice. Unfortunately for the two children, they have to flee their home both because of the Inquisition soldiers and because of rats surging from the ground all along the path. From the perspective of segmentation, the first chapter alternates between tutorials and calmer moments, and then concludes with an intense chase that ends with the children getting away by jumping in a river.

KILL OR BE KILLED

While they seem to be out of danger, the two children find themselves together for the very first time. Their relationship starts at the same time as the game, which is further proof of the studio's desire for us to experience the adventure in unison with Amicia and Hugo. The latter is probably discovering the outside world for the first time and is easily distracted by all of the new things he wants to understand and touch. This is typical behavior for a child, and Amicia has to scold him and hold his hand to guide him. Torn between her desire to tell him the truth and her desire to protect him, she chooses to lie to him about Lady Beatrice and take on the role of being a big sister for the first time. Her initial exchanges with her brother are mainly warnings about rotten fruit and white crosses on the doors in a village. Through these simple phrases, we also understand the importance of protecting Hugo. The second chapter, in addition to introducing us to the relationship between the two children, also aims to show us the cruelty of the era by having Amicia come face to face with people who want to kill her brother.

Violence in video games has been the subject of countless articles, and there's no sign of that stopping in the near future. However, since the 2010s, a notable change has taken place in a handful of mainstream games: murder is no longer taken lightly; it weighs heavily on the conscience of characters and sometimes, by extension, on the conscience of players. This intention is central in the writing of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, given that not only is Amicia not at all a warrior, but she is also still a teenager. Thus, when very early in the game she finds herself forced

to kill a man to protect her brother, that's a big deal for her and totally transforms her. Moreover, that sequence required a lengthy bit of work from the studio, which for a time had Amicia face off against several enemies, not just a single human being. According to David Dedeine, the change was a contribution from the team of producers at Focus, who advised him to make the moment a key point in the story. Out of an ordinary video game action—killing an enemy—the team forces us to make an inevitable choice that weighs on the girl's conscience. Amicia's innocence is lost forever and, from there, she gradually resorts to violence regularly, especially in *Requiem*, in which the subject is at the heart of the plot.

This sequence is not the only one to intertwine the story with gameplay. A few hours later, the game gives us the option to spare someone, and our actions alone determine that person's fate. While they cross the battlefield, the children come across a soldier at risk of being killed by the rats. However, his life is only in danger because the flame of Amicia's torch gradually pushes the rodents toward him. While the girl's first few killings can be explained by the imminent danger hovering over her own life or Hugo's life, in this case, it's perfectly possible to take some time to think and realize that the studio offers us the option to spare the soldier. A stand that can hold the torch has been carefully placed outside the camera's field of vision and it's up to the player to figure out how to avoid the tragedy. Nothing in the game changes according to the choice you make: in either case, you progress through the level in the same way. However, by really giving us the choice to spare another character, the studio touches on the fusion of storytelling and gameplay mentioned earlier.

THE ROLE OF RATS

Even though I've mentioned them regularly throughout this book, I haven't yet given them the place of honor they deserve as a defining feature of the series. They are part of the story just as much as the other characters, and their role stands at the intersection of gameplay and storytelling. The rats are not just a gimmick, and they are certainly not just a puzzle piece to be tossed aside using light. The danger that they represent is on multiple levels and is introduced indirectly with the death of Lion in the prologue. By foreshadowing their appearance, the studio puts in the player's mind the idea that a threat much bigger than the villagers or the Inquisition is waiting for the right moment to emerge. And that's exactly what the first two chapters of the game do: they present human beings as a source of danger when, in fact, that's just part of the story. The directorial choices for the appearance of the rats in chapter 3, entitled "Retribution," give us a wake-up call and show no mercy for poor Brother Thomas, who is devoured in a matter of seconds.

Of course, chapter 3 is also intended to be a tutorial for the various uses of light and objects in the environment, but by pivoting to very graphic horror, the Asobo team makes the rats a full-fledged antagonist. Unlike the Inquisition and Vitalis, for the majority of the story, the rats don't seem to act consciously, and they just jump on anything they can devour. Every aspect evokes the codes of horror films, from the movements of the hordes, being more evocative of a liquid than of animals, to the piercing sounds emanating from both the rats themselves and from the soundtrack. Even though in the Middle Ages the role of rats in spreading the Plague was not yet known, their aura is undeniably linked to the idea of vermin and disease in our modern-day minds. Just like spiders, which are among the most common enemies in video games, rats inspire disgust, and *A Plague Tale* takes things a bit further by making them deadly. This was done through many months of work on their behavior and their way of moving around, making it so that the slightest wrong move by players would be immediately penalized.

Horror films have long followed the path of transforming animals that are harmless on their own into uncontrollable menaces when they come in numbers. Here I'm thinking of the Alfred Hitchcock film *The Birds*, released in 1963, which, in a matter of minutes, can radically change your perception of the birds you come across in daily life. There's an entire subgenre of horror films presenting hordes of deadly creatures—there's the *Critters* film franchise, which started in the 1980s, or the *Tremors* movies from the 1990s. Other films present a particular enemy, like *Jaws* (1975) and *Alien* (1979). In talking with the members of Asobo Studio, I learned that many of them love the laid-back tone of horror films and B movies. In addition to leaning on the disgust evoked by the rats, the developers focused on the impact of their numbers—a fact that, indeed, the game's marketing campaign highlighted. The creators are well aware that these rodents are a defining feature of their series' identity and give *A Plague Tale* a unique flavor capable of distinguishing it from similar games.

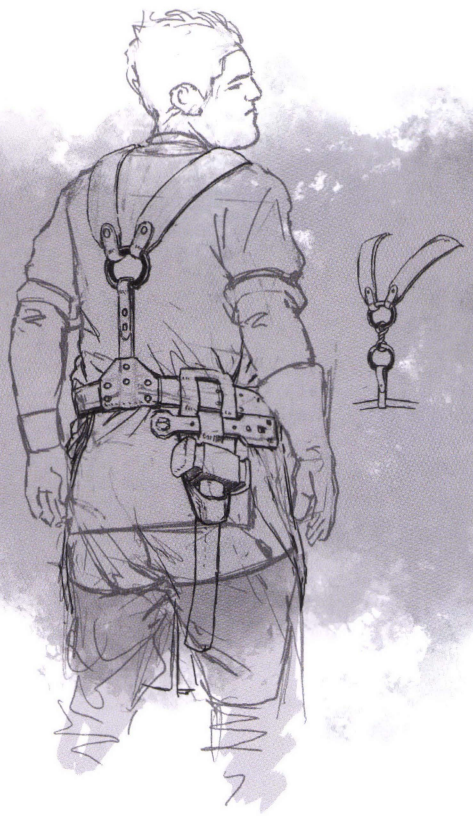
Throughout the first few chapters, the creators worked to permanently establish in our minds a fear of the rats and how to react as soon as we hear the piercing sound of the cellos announcing their arrival. Then, it turns out we're not the only ones having to deal with the rats: when we arrive at Château d'Ombrage, we learn that in the series' universe, others have had to figure out ways to keep the rats at bay. Little by little, the studio suggests that the rats' actions are not unconscious; rather, they have a very specific objective, raising doubt about their true role. This story arc is maintained until chapter 12, "All That Remains," in which we finally learn the rats' intentions upon the return of Amicia and Lucas to Lady Beatrice's laboratory. And this introduces another twist: Hugo's ability to control the rats and direct them wherever he pleases.

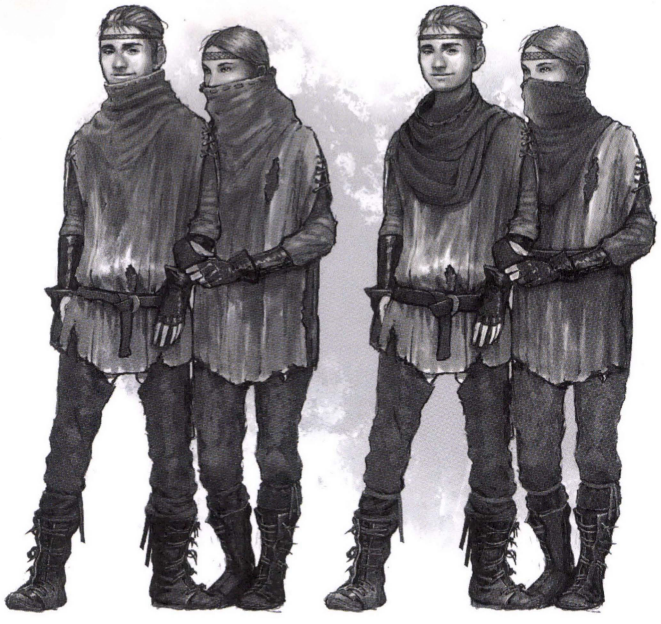
RODRIC

GROWING BY LEARNING FROM OTHERS

A central aspect of the story of *Innocence* has to do with the different people that Amicia and Hugo meet. Left to fend for themselves in this adult world, they make friendships with other children finding their own ways to survive. While, from the player's point of view, the idea is to offer a varied cast and opportunities to work with these new characters, for Amicia and Hugo, above all, it's a way for them to grow by learning from these other people. As an alchemist's apprentice, Lucas initially plays an advisory role and gradually becomes Amicia's confidant, while also having feelings for Mélie. As for her and her twin brother Arthur, they truly change the vision of the world offered to us before their arrival. They are the opposite of Amicia: they don't come from a privileged background and had to resort to theft from a very young age just to survive.

The beginning of chapter 7 is marked by the clash of their respective worlds after Mélie and Arthur help Amicia escape from the English soldiers' camp. It's hard to imagine these children becoming friends under other circumstances. However, the situation pushes them to team up and even hide out together at Château d'Ombrage. The various ellipses in the story indicate to us that with the time that's passed, the children have managed to build a home together





and develop a relationship. This adoptive family adds a bit of stability to the story. Alas, that stability is short-lived: Arthur becomes a prisoner and Hugo's condition doesn't improve. Forced to leave without Hugo to look for a book for Lucas, Amicia meets a blacksmith's apprentice, Rodric, who naturally joins the group. While the situation appears to improve after obtaining an elixir to provide some relief to Hugo, he discovers that his mother is still alive and that his sister chose to hide the truth from him.

ARTHUR & MÉLIE

STORYTELLING THROUGH GAMEPLAY

Continuing on the topic of friendships developed throughout the adventure, *Innocence* shows us that it's possible to tell a story through gameplay and, indeed, the companions serve as a good way to introduce this idea. Unlike in *The Last of Us*, in which the character who accompanies you doesn't exist for the enemies—occasionally resulting in unintentionally comical situations—whether it's Hugo or another character, they are partially governed by the same rules as Amicia. By this I mean that a tutorial clearly tells us that we must not leave Hugo on his own for too long. If he no longer sees Amicia, he may start crying and alert the guards. While initially this idea serves a storytelling purpose, it fits perfectly into the game's stealth gameplay. What the studio tries to make us understand with this approach is that we are not alone and that we are responsible for the lives of our companions. Hugo is not the only one affected by this rule: for example, Lucas occasionally grapples with soldiers, in which case you have to come to his aid in the allotted time or else have to start the sequence over as if Amicia died. Failure isn't the responsibility of a single character, but rather of the entire group. This important concept illustrates one of the facets of storytelling through gameplay.

Returning to the story of *Innocence*, the dispute between the two children takes shape from the very beginning of the adventure when Amicia chooses to not talk with Hugo about their mother's death. This elephant in the room is the source of tensions that accumulate and boil over when Amicia again decides to shelter her little brother by hiding the truth from him. Hugo's sudden departure is truly heartbreaking for both Amicia and for the player, who has had plenty of time to get attached to the characters over the hours of game time. Chapter 13, although very short, was designed to reinforce that feeling and to play off of the guilt that Amicia feels. Everything in the depictions, voice acting, and soundtrack reinforces the girl's despair and marks a turning point in the adventure. Amicia was supposed to protect her brother at all costs, and she failed in her mission. A few months later, we find that Amicia's guilt hasn't diminished and that she's gradually losing hope day by day of ever again seeing her brother alive.

The studio then offers us a twist that again illustrates the ability to tell a story through gameplay. From the beginning of the game, every effort is made to ingrain in us a fear of the rats, and we are only able to progress by using fire and tools of alchemy. However, after Amicia and Hugo are separated, the studio gives us control of the young boy and, at the same time, control of the rats. This reversal of roles allows the adventure to begin its slow climb toward the climax of the story with the face-off against Vitalis. Even more than the twist itself, it's the way in which it's carried out that interests me because, for the first time, we get to play as Hugo. Even though this change in point of view only lasts a few dozen minutes, it's a crucial moment in the game. We discover the world through the eyes of Hugo: his small size offers a perspective that differs from what we're used to, and the gameplay adapts to abandon action and focus solely on stealth.

After spending hours protecting the little boy, the player is perfectly aware of how defenseless he is against the armored soldiers or even against the other adults who buzz around him. Without the protection of his sister, he has to find the courage to act on his own and he stealthily weaves through a group of Inquisition members, who are much too occupied with carrying out Vitalis' plans. This passage teaches us a lot about the Inquisition's intentions and the horrible acts committed out of their desire to control the rats in order to put an end to the epidemic. Undoubtedly, this avalanche of information is partly lost on Hugo, who is focused on a clear objective: finding his mother. By following Sir Nicholas, he reaches the jail where many prisoners are held, including Lady Beatrice.

Their reunion again puts us in control of two characters, but this time, Hugo plays the role of protector and flees with Lady Beatrice before being stopped by the Inquisition's troops. It's not until they're reunited with Amicia that the final chapter can begin and put us in the shoes of the predator, after us having played the role of the prey throughout the entire adventure. This is a reminder of the game's segmentation into different sequences, with each stage leading to this climax in which, for the first time, the duo of protagonists are the ones who embody danger. Newly reunited with their mother, their confidence is restored and they finally go after their real enemy, which is no longer the rats, but rather Vitalis. The battle itself is surprising because of its grandiose presentation, which confirms that the game has fully adopted the position of its final third at that point, unabashedly embracing its relation to horror films. The nature of the battle itself is also implicitly foreshadowed from chapter 14 onward: when Hugo is looking for his mother, he passes through rooms where experiments are being done on white rats. Indeed, the Grand Inquisitor is trying to steal Hugo's power to control the rodents. As such, the duel revolves entirely around this supernatural ability, with Hugo controlling the black rats and Vitalis controlling the white rats. In addition to having to dodge what can only be described as tentacles made up of rats, Hugo and Amicia have to destroy tornadoes of rats launched by Vitalis. The change in tone is embraced once and for all. However, the adventure makes a return to reality for a final sequence: the epilogue.

HERALDING THE SEQUEL

Developed very late in the game's production, the epilogue of *Innocence* gave the studio the opportunity to leave the adventure on a gentler note, but without actually leaving us to imagine a happy ending for the protagonists. We see the children again on a sunny day in winter, sometime after their battle against Vitalis. Hugo has regained his usual good humor and marvels at everything around him, as is his habit. We might even imagine that he's regained his "innocence," but alas, this respite is short-lived. After Amicia takes part in a little game where she has to strike rat-shaped targets, Hugo insists on attending a celebration taking place to mark the end of the Inquisition's acts of violence throughout the region. Unfortunately, the local population was warned to keep an eye out for the boy: they immediately recognize Amicia and Hugo, and refuse them entry into the square where the celebration is being held.

While the little boy doesn't understand the injustice to which he's being subjected, Amicia has become wary of adults and knows that it's useless to insist, lest they be

forced back into a situation she knows all too well. She manages to shift her brother's attention elsewhere by having him race her to the cart where Lucas and Lady Beatrice are waiting for them. After the death of her twin brother and the discoveries related to Hugo's powers, Mélie decides to leave the group in search of a quieter life. In my conversations with the team, many of them told me that they were very fond of Mélie, regretting her departure and her absence from *Requiem*. While there are no plans in place for the moment, they suggested to me that they would love to be able to revisit Mélie in other adventures, but only time will tell what really happens there. As such, the epilogue is in no way a happy ending: characters near and dear to them are dead and the villagers' reaction shows Amicia that it would be best to leave the region so as not to attract attention. This semi-open ending provides a subdued conclusion to the adventures of Amicia and Hugo, while suggesting that the rest of their odyssey will take place in a completely different part of the country.

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

Only a handful of months pass between the two games, and with *Requiem*, the studio has a unique opportunity to continue the story of its characters and see where their adventures will take them. The main plot line continues to revolve around Hugo's illness and the journey undertaken to cure him, but the game also examines Amicia's attitude, her interactions with adults, and her own relationship with violence. The young woman ventures even deeper into a murderous cycle, from which it seems impossible to get out, with events always leading to a battle. It's hard for Amicia to imagine returning to a normal life, as she has been definitively removed from the life proper to her social status. Still, there remains a form of hope, embodied by the life trajectories of her companions in *Requiem*: a former knight named Arnaud, and Sophia, a smuggler willing to help them cross the Mediterranean. In a way, these adults can serve as role models for her as both embody, in their own way, a facet of Amicia's personality: her violent tendencies and her desire for independence. Clearly, the notion of "innocence" is gone: with Amicia being more prepared to use violence, it becomes her instinctive response to many situations.

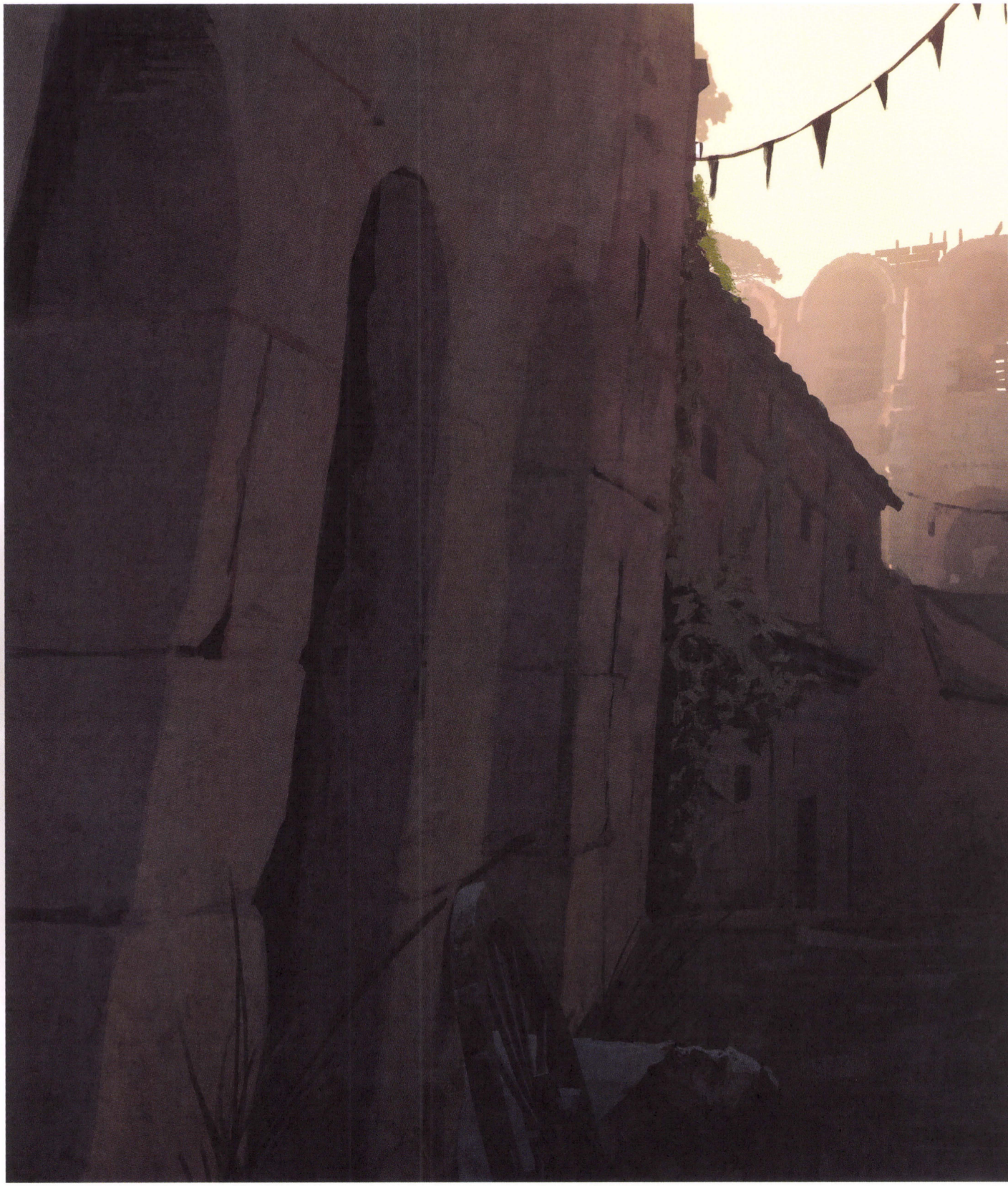
Her past actions define her. They influence both her worldview and her relationships with others, who seem to always want to do harm to her little brother. Her distrust of adults is regularly fed by lies, and it becomes harder and harder for her to trust anyone. As for Hugo, the little boy is now living with his strange power. He gradually becomes aware of his share of responsibility for the tragic events that follow him wherever he goes. It's in this context that *Requiem* begins. It's a sequel that nonetheless gives us a glimmer of hope for its characters. In fact, hope is a recurring topic between Amicia and Hugo, who imagine finding a quiet place, far from all cities, where they can live a happy life. At the same time, Hugo dreams more and more often of an island that may hold a permanent cure for him.

EVOLUTION OF THE GAMEPLAY

Just as you must have continuity in the storytelling, the game design for a sequel generally tends to rely on what was developed for the first installment. That way, players can find their bearings before discovering the updates and refinements to the game systems. Accordingly, the foundations of *Requiem* are the same as those in *Innocence*: the game is still a blend of stealth and action. However, Amicia becomes more self-assured and develops new techniques, more often involving her companions. The sequel still aims to tell its story through gameplay, and the incorporation of puzzles to be solved with other characters is a great example of this. *Innocence* already has a few examples of contextual actions: Hugo can sneak around to open a door, Rodric can take out a guard, and Mélie can pick a lock. In *Requiem*, the game spaces open up and, at the same time, the studio offers players greater freedom in their actions.

During their visit to the amphitheater in the Red City, Amicia and Lucas are again faced with rats and get separated by the wave of rodents. Reuniting them requires using one of the game's new features: the ability to send an object to your companion. Thus, you have to throw a torch to Lucas over a zone infested with rats so that he can light it and rejoin you. This addition, which at first seems insignificant, reinforces the feeling of immersion in the game's universe and takes part in the storytelling. These short sequences give the authors the opportunity to write lines of dialogue to highlight the relationships between the characters, while also making us feel like we're actively involved in those relationships. These actions are a way of defining their personalities, learning more about them, and making them more human. For example, I'm reminded of Lucas' way of making fun of a situation to build up his own courage. Throughout the adventure, the player can call on Amicia's companions on many occasions to make use of their talents or simply to get out of a tricky situation. And just like in *Innocence*, the player often has to come to their aid, which reinforces the idea that Amicia truly is the Protector: she ensures the well-being of her brother, but also of her companions, no matter their age.

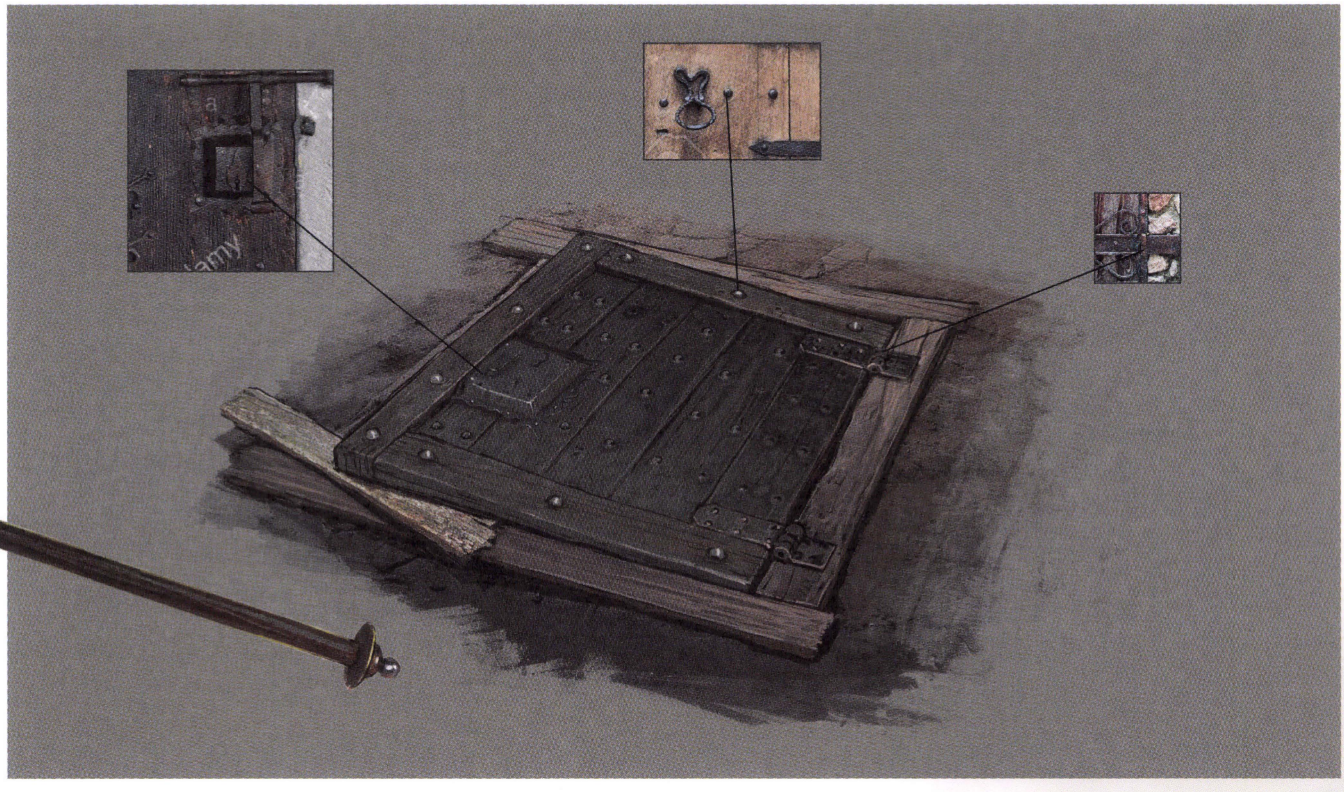
In addition to opening up the game space, the studio incorporates what's called system-based gameplay, which involves the ability to make use of game mechanics outside of scripted sequences. Very early in the adventure, we learn that it's possible to launch the same alchemical projectiles in different ways: putting the projectile in a pot to cover a large area, by hand to avoid making noise, or using the sling for a formidable effect. There's not just one solution that works every time and you can experiment to figure



out an approach that suits you. Once you've obtained the crossbow, you discover that you can also shoot bolts into wooden surfaces so that they remain planted. You can then light a bolt on fire to create an area of light on your own instead of always relying on braziers carefully placed by the studio. In *Requiem*, it's also possible to combine different alchemical projectiles in order to strengthen the effect. Against a guard bearing a torch, you can put it out in order to attract the rats or, conversely, make the flame burn more intensely so as to blind the guard and create a larger area of light. This new approach allows you to spare the guards and fits into another update to the gameplay: assignment of experience according to the chosen style of gameplay.

Without becoming a full-fledged RPG, *Requiem* offers, in addition to Amicia's improved equipment, an experience gauge that fills according to your actions. The idea is to push the player to diversify their approach, while not discouraging their efforts. The most revealing example concerns Amicia's ability to spare the lives of her adversaries: by making use of this discretion, the young woman can walk faster while under cover, make less noise, etc. Conversely, whenever she uses violence, it can boost the damage done or the speed of her sling or crossbow. Additionally,

Amicia can regularly use a dagger to kill an adversary in hand-to-hand combat. Better yet, she doesn't automatically die as soon as a guard gets near her. She can defend herself or repel her adversaries using alchemical projectiles. Using the latter is also among the possible evolutions for Amicia, enabling her to create projectiles faster or strengthening their effects. All of these additions don't just give us greater freedom: they allow us, with the controller in our hands, to feel Amicia getting stronger as she increasingly gives in to her violent side.

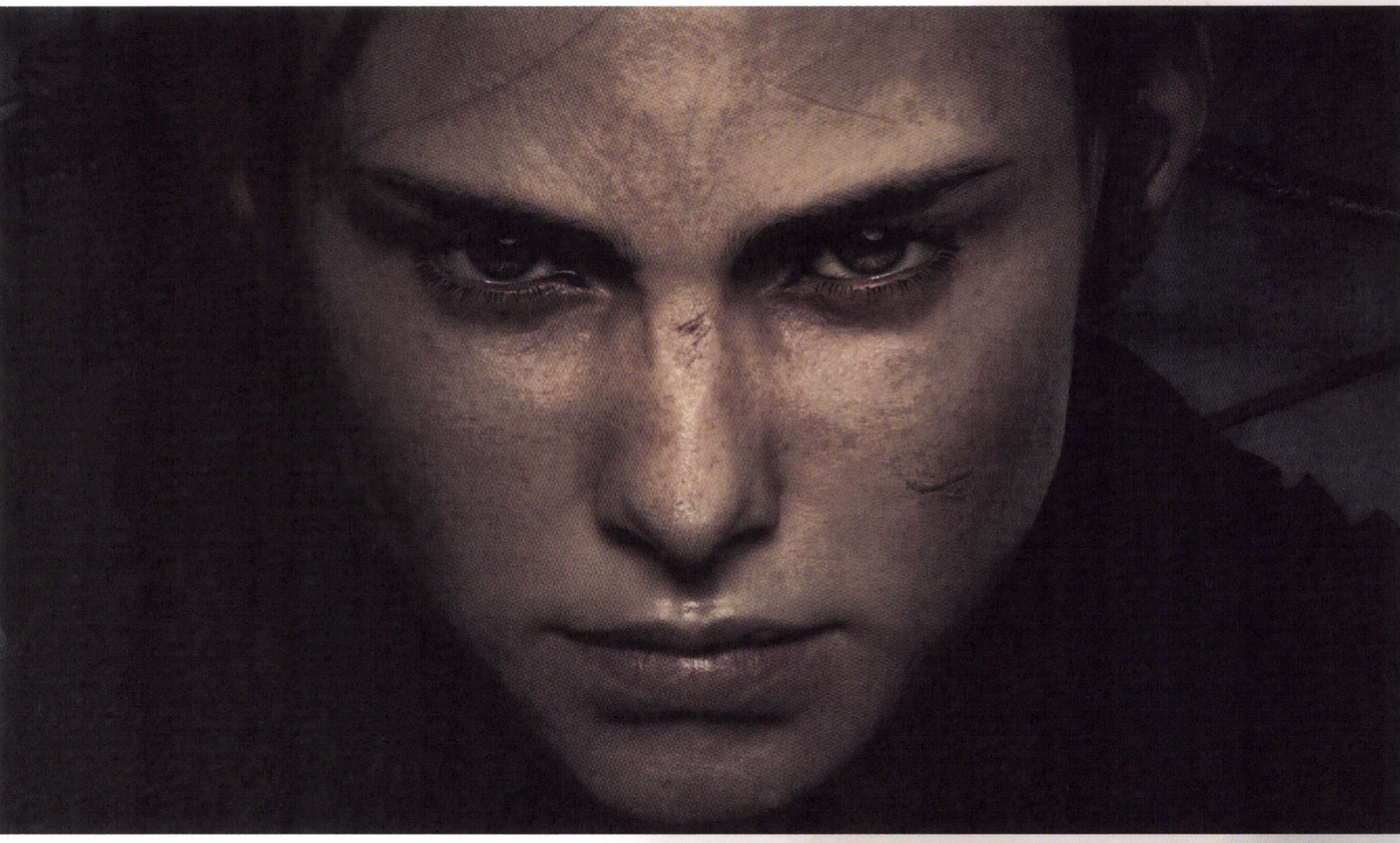


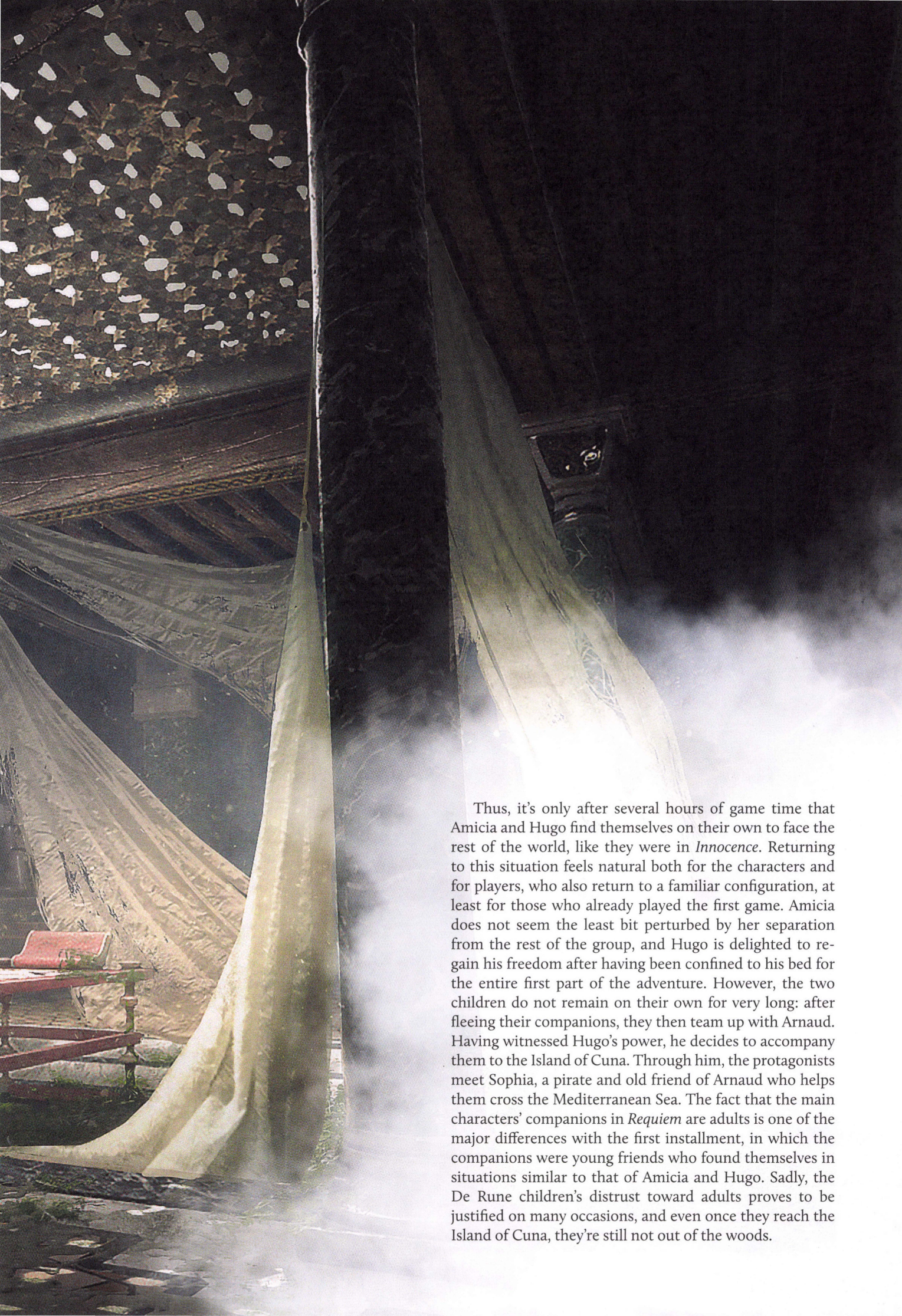
AMICIA AGAINST THE WORLD

In *Innocence*, Amicia is presented as a girl who has no other choice but to defend herself against the Inquisition. Her frustration sometimes gets the better of her, particularly when she meets Rodric, but other than the rats, her enemies are all soldiers and never civilians. This distinction evolves somewhat starting in the prologue of *Requiem*, in which Amicia and her little brother are forced to flee a farm where they're not welcome. This sequence is, of course, intended to introduce the game's universe and controls to new players, but it's also meant to help us understand Amicia's point of view, which is to be wary of everyone. What we may have understood as simple distrust toward adults is generalized in *Requiem*, and it seems that the young woman no longer trusts anyone at all, not even her mother. The first part of the adventure presents the rising tensions between the two of them, with, on the one hand, Lady Beatrice trying to fulfill her role as a mother and, on the other hand, Amicia reproaching her for not doing what's needed to save Hugo. The arrival in the Red City is supposed to mark the start of a new, calmer era, but the boy's health gets worse and Amicia is sent to look for Master Vaudin, an alchemist of the Order. This forced separation is a particularly bad experience for the young woman, who discovers that the Order may not be capable of saving her brother, in spite of the encouraging words from Beatrice and Lucas.

Once again, Amicia finds herself in a situation in which her frustration gets the better of her. While she and Lucas are tasked with finding medicinal plants, she carries out a true massacre—she's willing to do whatever it takes to save her loved ones and she starts to forget that she can try to avoid confrontation. Once the battle is finished, she snaps out of it and realizes she's sinking a bit more each day into a spiral of destructive violence. And nothing seems to work out for her, as she learns that Hugo is quite certainly doomed by his disease. Still, the young boy continues to talk about the island in his dreams, a place where, according to him, he may be cured, but the adults pay no attention to his demands. Incidentally, a short sequence of the game takes place in his dreams: Hugo finds himself on an island with lush vegetation and a bird—a phoenix—indicates to him the path to follow in order to find a natural spring capable of curing him. The marks of the disease gradually

disappear, and it's at that precise moment that he awakes. As the Macula remains active, he occasionally has fits, one of which unleashes a wave of tens of thousands of rats, a veritable tsunami that destroys the entire city and forces the group to flee once again. While she's still accompanied by Lucas and Beatrice, Amicia becomes more and more convinced that she is the only one capable of protecting and understanding Hugo. Forced to flee the city by boat, the group runs into Arnaud's soldiers along the river and Amicia again gets to give free rein to her anger by eliminating all obstacles in her path. Shortly thereafter, an opportunity to leave on her own with Hugo presents itself and she doesn't hesitate to leave Lucas and her mother behind in order to find the island the boy has been dreaming of.





Thus, it's only after several hours of game time that Amicia and Hugo find themselves on their own to face the rest of the world, like they were in *Innocence*. Returning to this situation feels natural both for the characters and for players, who also return to a familiar configuration, at least for those who already played the first game. Amicia does not seem the least bit perturbed by her separation from the rest of the group, and Hugo is delighted to regain his freedom after having been confined to his bed for the entire first part of the adventure. However, the two children do not remain on their own for very long: after fleeing their companions, they then team up with Arnaud. Having witnessed Hugo's power, he decides to accompany them to the Island of Cuna. Through him, the protagonists meet Sophia, a pirate and old friend of Arnaud who helps them cross the Mediterranean Sea. The fact that the main characters' companions in *Requiem* are adults is one of the major differences with the first installment, in which the companions were young friends who found themselves in situations similar to that of Amicia and Hugo. Sadly, the De Rune children's distrust toward adults proves to be justified on many occasions, and even once they reach the Island of Cuna, they're still not out of the woods.

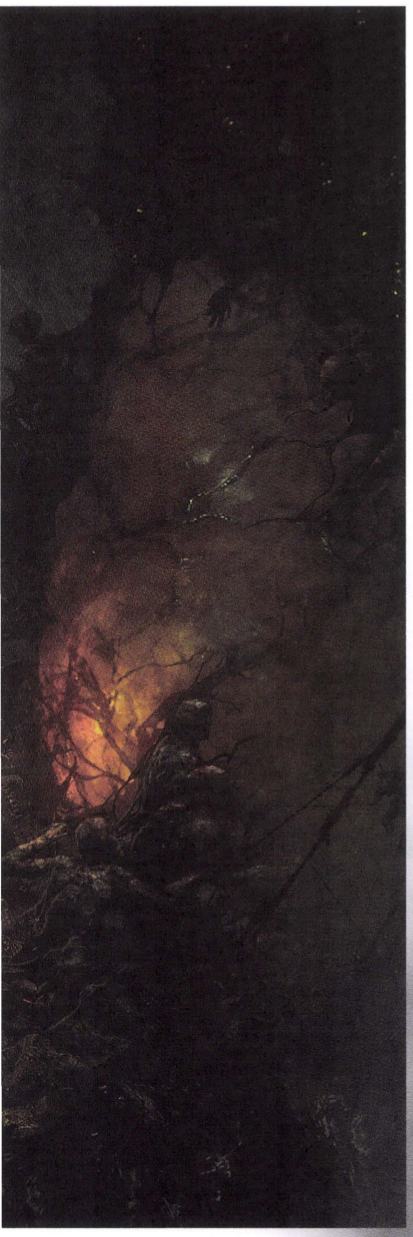
THE ISLAND OF CUNA, A LIE FOR THE BENEFIT OF A COUPLE

After a long voyage, the group finally reaches the island that Hugo has dreamed of for months, and it turns out their timing is perfect: the island's inhabitants are preparing for a local festival in which they pray for the return of a prophesied child who will save them. We later learn that some of the women living on the island are unable to bear children, which is the case for Émilie, the wife of the Count of Provence, who is willing to do whatever it takes out of love for his lady. The arrival on the island marks the return to a situation that players know all too well: a town in celebration, residents dancing and singing, and even a procession of dancers circulating around the town. The respite is short-lived: while the group is listening to a speech by the count himself, Arnaud reveals that he wants to use Hugo to exact revenge by killing the count. Once again, Amicia and Hugo are betrayed by an adult, and even worse, one of their companions who appeared to really be on their side. These events, one after another, only reinforce Amicia's distrust of everyone else, and even an invitation to dinner at the count's palace doesn't stop her from keeping her eyes on the prize.

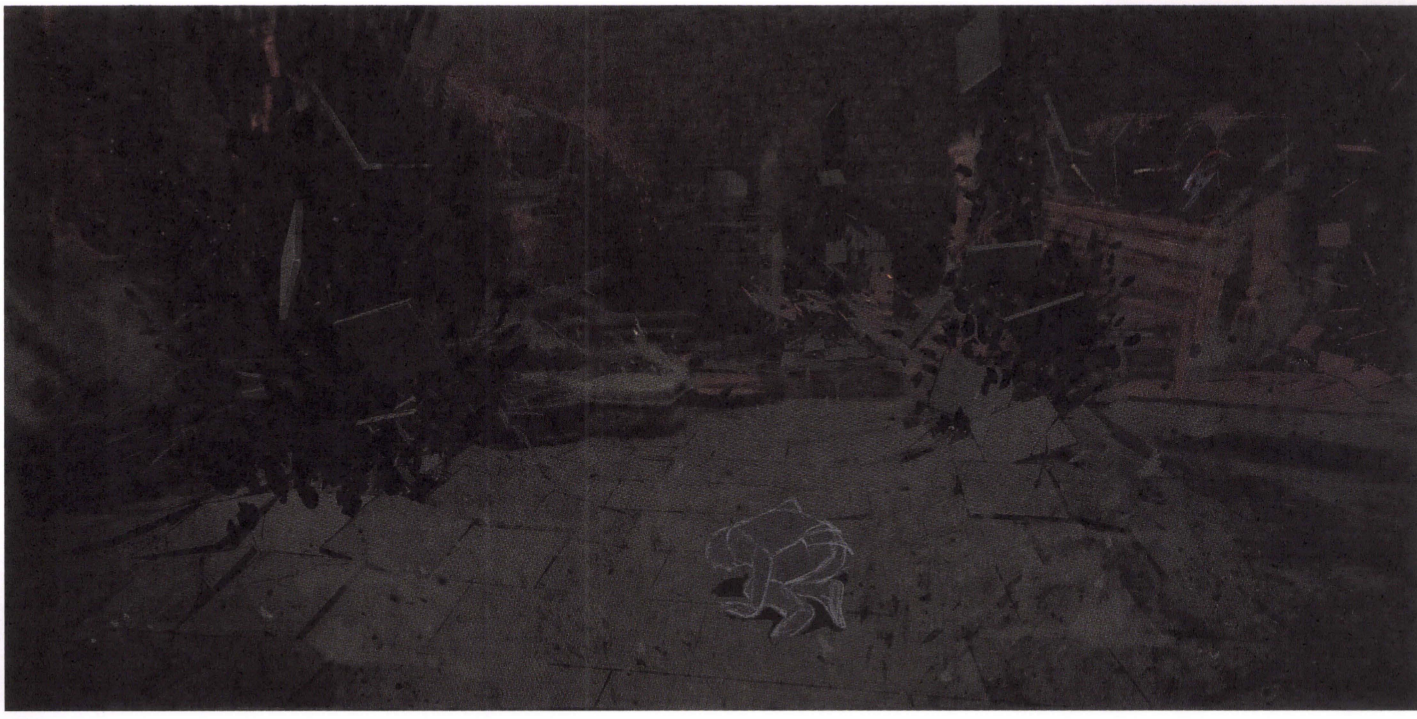
The very next day, she gets back on the road with her brother to explore the island and find clues that might lead them to the bird in Hugo's dream. In addition to gaining information about the local legend that all of the islanders seem to believe in, they end up showing up in the middle of a ritual being held in a temple tucked directly in between the two mountains that dominate the heart of the island.

The truth is partially revealed during the ritual. Émilie, in particular, is eager for the return of the child and wishes to adopt him in hopes of finally being able to give birth to her own child. As for Amicia, Hugo, and Sophia, they plunge into the temple and discover that there once existed a duo of a Protector, Aelia, and a Carrier, Basil. Still convinced that a cure for Hugo exists somewhere among the documents or ruins of the Order, the group then infiltrates a fort that's home to a group of slave merchants, led by Milo. We discover that the fanaticism surrounding the prophesied child leads to the commission of horrific acts—at this point, Hugo and Amicia both give in to their anger and kill the bandits.

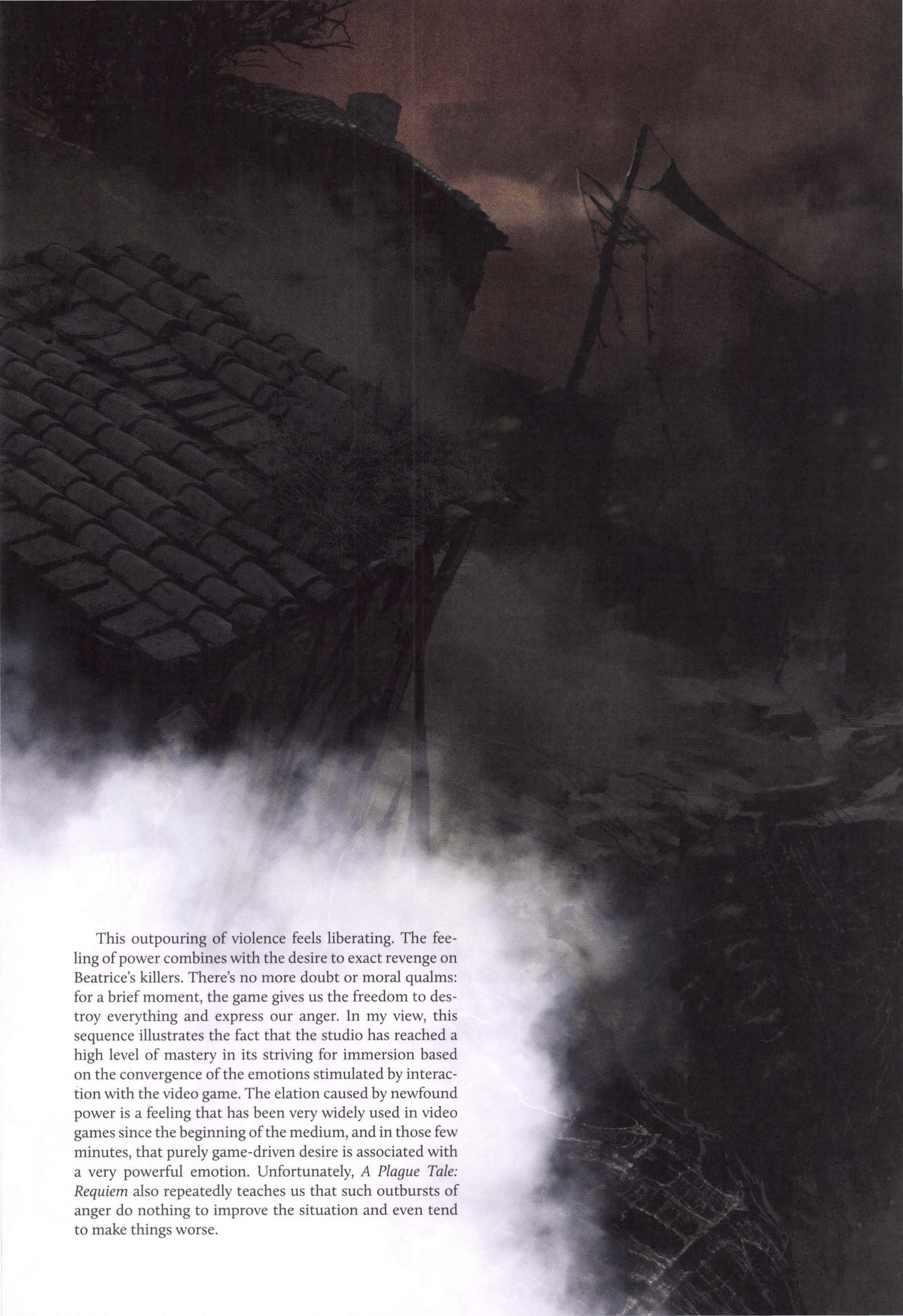
After this, their hope has virtually evaporated, but they have one last lead to follow, and it leads them beneath some ruins located in the very middle of the island, where an enormous prison was built centuries earlier. Going deeper and deeper underground, they eventually discover the remains of the previous Carrier, who was chained up by the members of the Order after being separated from his Protector. Hugo can't understand why his dream led him here, and after escaping from that hellhole, the group decides that it's time to give up and to choose to live a quiet life once and for all. Amicia is convinced: if Hugo no longer has to run and worry for his life, it may be possible to avoid unleashing another epidemic like the Plague of Justinian. Just when it seems like the climax of the adventure is behind them, Asobo Studio reminds us that not only are Beatrice and Lucas still alive, but they've reached the island and are now guests of the count. Amicia has to return to see her mother before rejoining Sophia so that they can leave the accursed island.



ARMOR
OF AELIA



What we then discover is that the story of Aelia and Basil was in fact a harbinger for the fate of Amicia and Hugo. We now know that the two protagonists must not be separated. Just minutes after being reunited with her mother and Lucas, Amicia is left with no choice but to see the Count, who wishes to talk with her. Yet again, an adult betrays the young woman: the count plans to first kill Amicia, then take out Beatrice and Lucas, so that Hugo can become Émilie's adopted son. We then come to understand that the disillusion of the Count and Countess apparently knows no bounds. Believing that the young boy is the answer to all their problems, they execute Lady Beatrice right in front of Amicia, who's powerless to stop them. The sequence that follows is regularly foreshadowed from the beginning of the adventure and again illustrates the overlap between storytelling and gameplay. After having witnessed what Hugo is capable of, the player finally takes control of the boy as he unleashes hordes of rats on the count's dozens of soldiers. This short sequence takes place just after Beatrice's death, while Amicia is seriously injured from her fight with the count.

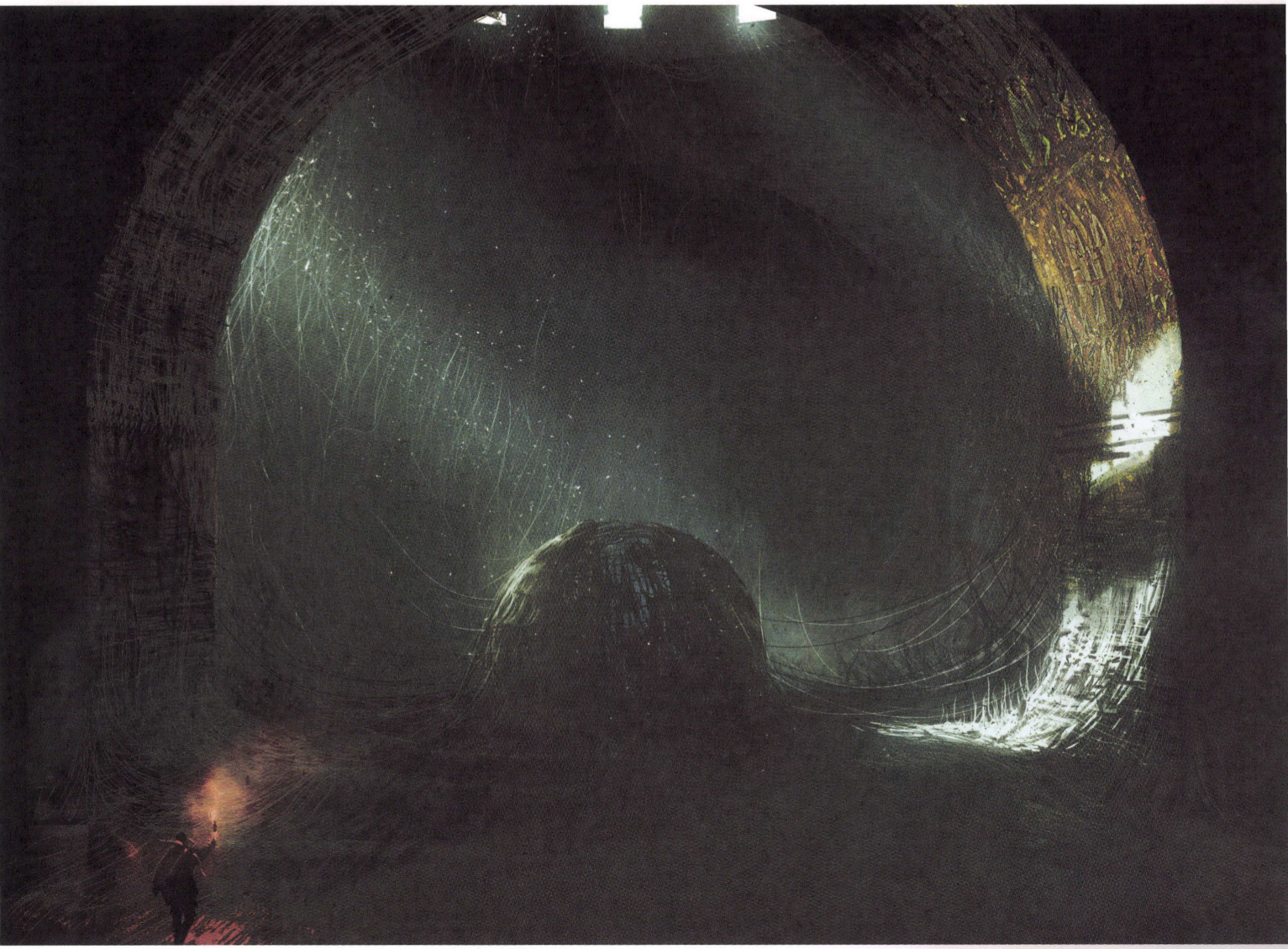


This outpouring of violence feels liberating. The feeling of power combines with the desire to exact revenge on Beatrice's killers. There's no more doubt or moral qualms: for a brief moment, the game gives us the freedom to destroy everything and express our anger. In my view, this sequence illustrates the fact that the studio has reached a high level of mastery in its striving for immersion based on the convergence of the emotions stimulated by interaction with the video game. The elation caused by newfound power is a feeling that has been very widely used in video games since the beginning of the medium, and in those few minutes, that purely game-driven desire is associated with a very powerful emotion. Unfortunately, *A Plague Tale: Requiem* also repeatedly teaches us that such outbursts of anger do nothing to improve the situation and even tend to make things worse.

LETTING GO

To close out this chapter dedicated to the connections between storytelling and gameplay, I think that the ending to *Requiem* is another great example of the principle. I remember that in our first conversations back in 2019, the team was already talking about Hugo's death as the inevitable conclusion to the second volume, without knowing exactly how that death would play out. This is likely the aspect that was changed and refined the most, given its high stakes and the fact that it brings an end to the adventures of Amicia and Hugo. Although video games have always had us kill enemies without a second thought, the death of a protagonist is never a matter to be taken lightly. Indeed, certain games made a splash in their time with the death of a beloved character—in particular, I'm thinking of a game published in the late 1990s. To avoid giving any spoilers, I'll simply say that the publisher of this book, Third Éditions, has published several books on the Japanese saga to which the game in question belongs. Frankly, it is very difficult to kill off a protagonist: the directorial choices must be balanced so as not to overdo it, or even worse, so as not to seem like you don't care about the character. But as I see it, one issue is that failure and death are elements rooted in video-game history.

Since the 1980s and the "game over" screen inherited from arcade games, failure has been an obligatory step for progress in video games. Several genres have even been built around this aspect: in particular, I'm thinking of the "roguelike"[1] games, in which death is permanent and each adventure is thus unique. The game that started this genre, *Rogue*, was created in 1980 and it continues to have a very strong influence to this day. Examples include *Diablo* (1997), in which you have to find your body after a failure, or more recently *Hades* (2018), which sends you back to the realm of the dead to start over with a new game. I'm sure we could dedicate an entire book to the way in which failure and death are handled in video games. And since I would be remiss if I didn't mention it, FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* saga had a massive influence on video games by making failure a form of learning in the game. In the case of *A Plague Tale*, failure means returning to the last checkpoint or save point, and the player is free to restart a section as many times as they want. However, as we've seen in this chapter, the series aims to make the act of killing a special case, with heavy consequences for Amicia. Given this fact, how could the team ensure that Hugo's death would have an impact on players? By making us play a role in his death: it's up to



us to wind up our sling one last time in order to end the boy's suffering.

More than this action alone, it's everything leading up to it that makes the ending of *Requiem* so poignant. Going back to the intensity curve mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter, it climbs constantly from chapter 12 onward and the game reaches its climax in chapter 15, "Convoy." The Asobo team succeeded in offering us a true action scene thanks to the usage of wagons equipped with Greek fire, making *Requiem* feel like, for a chapter, a modern action game with a chase scene in vehicles. The final third of the game is increasingly charged with emotions: Lady Beatrice is killed right in front of us, Arnaud dies simultaneously with the count, and Hugo approaches the final threshold of his disease, believing that his sister is dead. This maelstrom of emotions is a launchpad that takes us into chapter 16, "Crater," designed to be a conclusion in the form of an emotional apotheosis. More than ever, the game gives up on striving for realism in favor of grandiose presentation, with the immense sphere of Nebula with Hugo at its center.

1. Roguelike, not to be confused with roguelite: there's a difference, and if this subject interests you, I encourage you to search for "the Berlin Interpretation" using your preferred search engine.

LUCAS

Reality gradually disappears as we reach the center of the crater, and Amicia eventually hears Hugo's voice as he guides her and prepares her for what she must to achieve her objective. After spending so much time continually forging ahead, fighting against all odds without ever giving up, Hugo informs us that we must go against what our instincts are telling us to do. The path is marked by phoenix statues, which are points of reference for the player throughout the time on the Island of Cuna, and to advance, the player must actually walk in the opposite direction of what's indicated. In its own way, the game makes us understand that we must abandon our reflexes and, even harder, we must let go of the little boy's hand. Throughout the entire adventure, we learn to avoid losing sight of Hugo as much as possible, and each sequence in which Amicia is separated from him by force inevitably ends in tragedy. And yet, it's up to us to decide to let go, to give the command and tell Hugo to wait for us, to no longer come with us.

From a symbolic point of view, that alone is a very powerful action, especially because it's up to us, the players, to carry it out. The way in which the game brings us to this conclusion is, once again, a reminder of the studio's penchant for horror. As we advance aimlessly, holding Hugo's hand, we gradually see Amicia's many victims appear, as well as characters who died because of the protagonists' actions. Aiming to provoke a reaction from players, the studio hopes to make them understand that continuing forward will only perpetuate the cycle of violence. The only solution is to let go of Hugo's hand, to abandon him. It's only at that point that we can find Lucas and see where Hugo is. We are then faced with a final choice: it's impossible to reach the little boy and the game makes us understand that he must die; otherwise, a disaster even worse than the Plague of Justinian will be unleashed. One last time, Amicia must load her sling and then willfully kill her brother.

Hugo dies, and this event is particularly impactful given that the player is the one responsible. At the beginning of this chapter, I brought up how a video game can tell a story through gameplay, and this penultimate sequence has to be one of the best examples of this. Finally, the epilogue is designed to both draw out Amicia's feeling of guilt and also to give us an opportunity to say goodbye to Hugo. A few months after the events on the Island of Cuna, we find Amicia living alone in a cabin in the mountains. While it's not made explicit, the cabin is likely the one mentioned by Lady Beatrice where Amicia imagined living peacefully with her brother. When Sophia enters the scene, we get the context we need to situate this epilogue in time, and a few open questions are answered, particularly regarding the fate of Lucas. Even though she cut herself off from the outside world, Amicia still has a reason to live. As a survivor, she will do everything she can to warn future generations about the dangers of the Macula and of anyone wishing to control it: that's her way giving Hugo's death meaning.

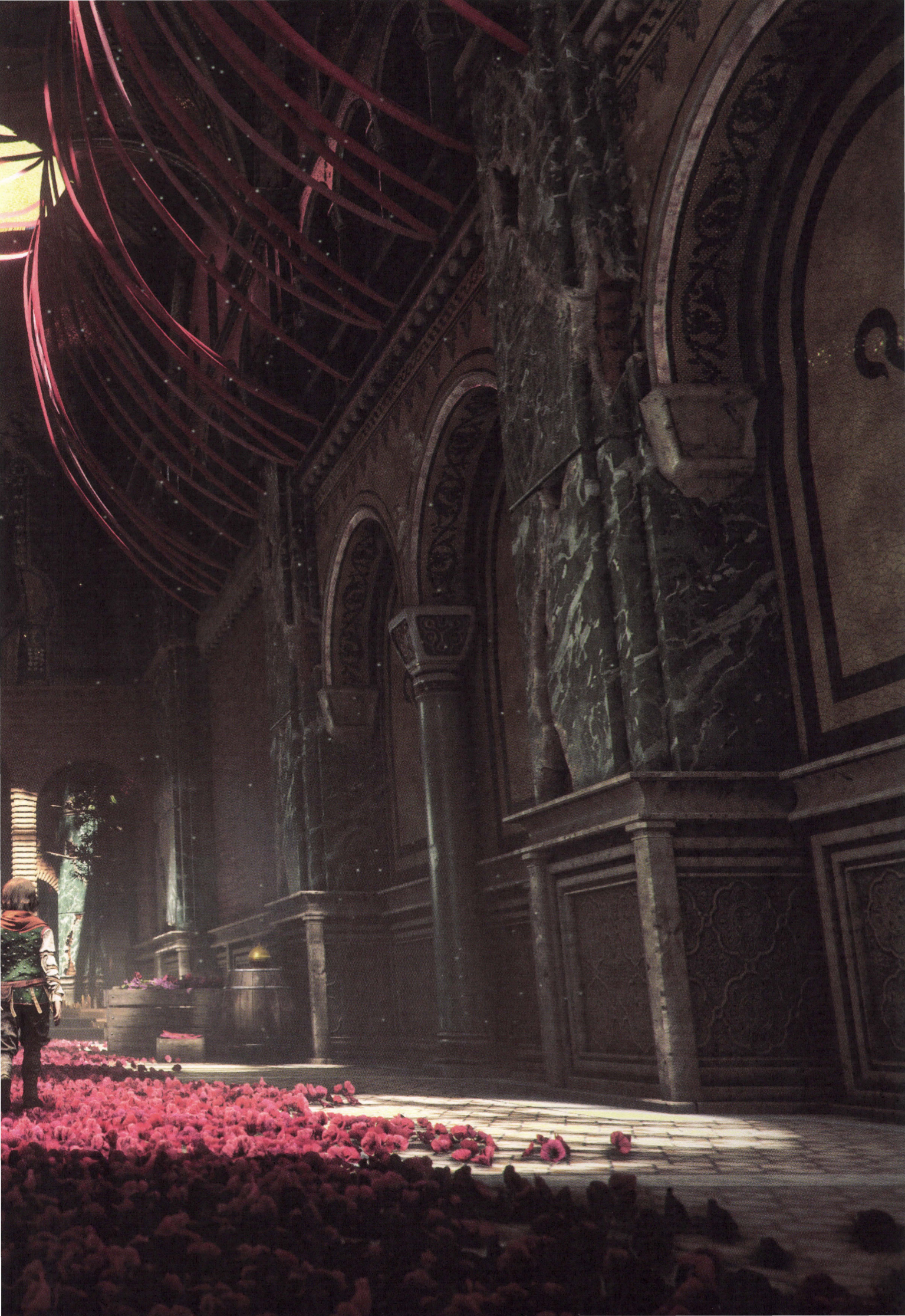
V

CONCLUSION

I've been working in collaboration with game studios for several years now and I have regularly heard developers from around the world say that each video game released is a small miracle. I've finally come to understand this saying and believe it myself. In fact, I took on the writing of this book with the goal of sharing with you some of what I've learned about what happens behind the scenes. Developing a video game is never simple, and I take very seriously my role as a mediator between you and the Asobo Studio team. Shrinking the divide between you is, in my view, essential for the future of the video-game industry, and I am honored to take part in this larger effort through this book. I am particularly proud that the Bordeaux-based studio is setting a good example with this project, proving that the culture of secrecy is not absolute and that it's perfectly possible to open up to the public. The same openness that the team showed me can be found in their games, and is even perhaps partially responsible for the success of the *Plague Tale* series. I have no doubt that all developers worldwide are invested in their projects. However, I can't help but think that the members of Asobo Studio have a little something extra, which I have tried to describe throughout this book.

My very first meeting with a handful of Asobo team members actually took place before I started working on this book, during an event organized by the game publisher Focus in early 2019. I must admit that, at the time, I had only a vague idea of the Bordeaux-based studio's history, though I at least knew the name. Three years later, as I prepare to put the finishing touches on this book, I have a hard time remembering back when *A Plague Tale* wasn't on my mind every day. On a personal level, what I'll remember most from this project is the many hours spent talking openly and honestly with the Asobo team, who welcomed me with open arms, as if I was one of them. I'm beginning to realize that this may have been a unique opportunity in my career, and I'm getting a lump in my throat just thinking about turning the page. And if I, as a humble writer, feel this way, I can only imagine how the members of the studio must feel after having spent many years working with the game's characters. For this reason, I believe that the name of this book's collection, *The Heart of*, is particularly fitting because it's not just about highlighting a game, but rather about shedding light on all of the people behind the game's unique universe.

In any case, that's one of the goals I set for myself in telling you the story of Asobo Studio, which wanted to make a name for itself among mainstream audiences with games capable of touching players' hearts. I don't think it's a stretch for me to say that the studio has overwhelmingly achieved its objectives. Indeed, as luck would have it, after months of hinting, it's finally official: the universe of *A Plague Tale* is to be adapted into a TV series. As I see it, this is excellent news because, up to this point, the games that have received this treatment are some of the most famous: *The Witcher*, *Halo*, and *League of Legends*, just to name a few. From there, *A Plague Tale* is just steps away from entering the video-game pantheon, and for me, Asobo's success isn't only measured in sales or ratings. The mark of a great game doesn't depend solely on offering a spectacular adventure: great games make their own unique contributions to the illustrious history of the modern video game. Beyond their technical expertise, the members of Asobo Studio seem to have grown from working with this medieval universe, proving to everyone that a human-scale story and endearing characters can stay with people for a long time.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

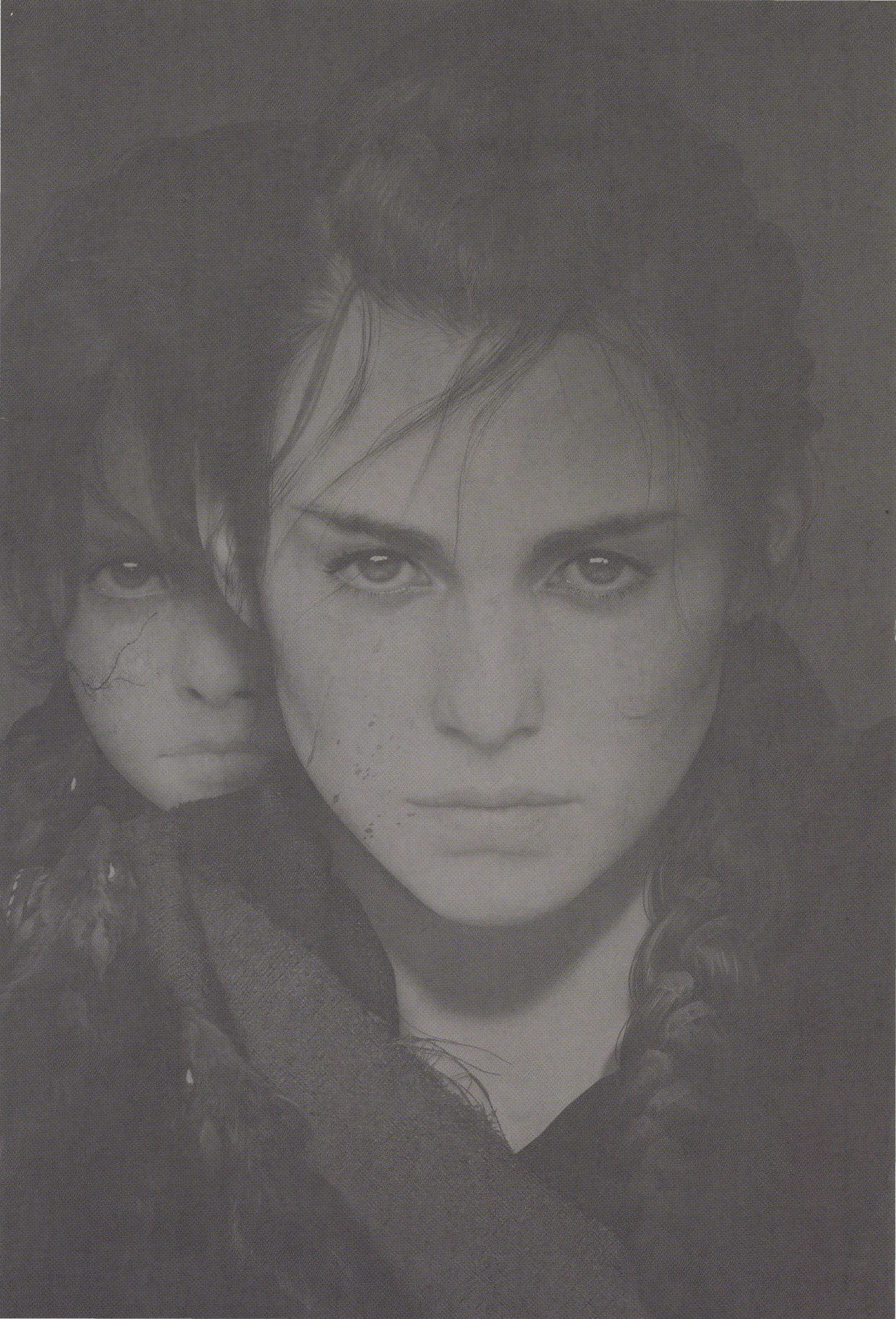
I WOULD LIKE TO THANK:

The Third Éditions team, and Damien in particular, for supporting me throughout this incredible project.

All the members of Asobo Studio for their warm welcome, their friendship, and their trust, for which I am honored. It will be hard for me to no longer get regular news from the team in Bordeaux.

I still have a hard time believing that this all started with just a tweet, so thank you, Rohan Mussard, for giving fate a little push in the right direction without even knowing it.

Thank you to Hugo and Maxime, my co-hosts of *Fin du Game*, and to my friends Benjamin, Joffrey, and Théo, to whom I wish all the best.

My very dear Laurelyne, who I love with all my heart and who, despite her illness, is always there to comfort me, give me advice, and help me keep going in this strange career.

Finally, I would like to thank you, reader. For years, I've been trying to make the reality of the video-game industry more accessible and, in my view, this book is an opportunity to share with you everything that I've learned over the past few years. I hope that you will want to keep learning more about the fascinating art of the video game.